CREATIVITY AND SCHIZOPHRENIA

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Essay

Summary

Schizophrenia is a severe mental illness, most frequently characterised by illogical and incoherent thinking, delusions and hallucinations. Due to unknown etiology many theories exist, with combination of environmental and genetic factors being the most likely one. Despite the high discrimination rates, possibly due to the certain dose of mystery they bring, popular culture regards schizophrenic people as creative. Even before the interest of researchers piqued, Greek philosophers regarded “madness” as one of the prerequisites for great things. Since the 1970-s, numerous studies were carried out. Some researchers report finding the correlation between the schizophrenia and creativity, but the unambiguous proof remains to be found. In this essay, after the literature on the studies linking the schizophrenia and creativity is reviewed, influence of illness on the artist’s perception was analysed on the example of Brian Charnley’s Self-Portrait Series. Also, the cases of mathematician and Nobel-Laureate John Nash and Pink Floyd frontman Syd Barrett are presented.

Key words: creativity; schizophrenia; mental illness,

1. Introduction

According to the American Psychological Association, schizophrenia (gr. “schizo”, split; “phren”, mind) is “a serious mental illness characterized by incoherent or illogical thoughts, delusions or hallucinations” [1]. Etiology of schizophrenia is fairly unknown, and universally accepted theory is yet to be found, even though most of the facts point to the combination of genetic and environmental factors [2]. Course of illness can be divided into the three phases, prodromal in which the psychosis develops, active, characterized by the fully blown psychosis and residual in which the psychosis subsides.

Illness most often manifests itself during the late adolescence and early adulthood, with women being on the latter end of the spectrum. Despite the fact that epidemiology studies suggest that roughly 1 in 200 people suffers from some type of schizophrenia [3], those suffering face one of the highest discrimination rates among the mental disorders. Social isolation, fiercely fought by the healthcare workers, causes depression and hopelessness during the residual phases, and is consequently one of the high suicide rate causes [4].

However, in spite of the mentioned hardships, history has shown us that some of the most creative people have suffered from schizophrenia. To mention a few, both Syd Barrett, legendary Pink Floyd frontman and John Nash, father of the game theory have been diagnosed [5]. In this article, influence of the schizophrenia on the individual’s creativity has been reviewed, and its influence on the authors work during the course of illness is shown.
2. Influence on creativity

The idea that psychosis has the influence on creativity is not new. Even though the interest of researchers peaked during the 1970-s and again in the 2000-s, in Plato’s Phaedrus Socrates stated that “Madness, provided it comes as the gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings…” [5]. Furthermore, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream [6], Shakespeare wrote that “The lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact”.

In the modern times, researchers started to further associate creativity with schizophrenia. A large comparative study on giftedness [7] was carried out on 3800 Icelanders born between the 1881 and 1910. Author concluded that considerable evidence exist that the rate of gifted individuals is considerably higher for the relatives of the psychotic people, who he assumed “possessed the principal gene” of schizophrenia. Nasenfus and Magaro [8] considered the possibility that schizophrenia and creativity are fragments of the same process. They determined that different subtypes of schizophrenia account for the different kinds of creativity.

When observing the data between the 1970 and 1980, it is important to know that during those years, many conditions were considered as schizophrenia so the conclusions could easily be clouded by unrelated data [9]. However, with time, theories also evolved. New light on the subject was shed by Kinney and Richards, who suggested that the symptoms of schizophrenia in fact decrease creativity [10], but the presence of other psychological characteristics linked to it may aid creativity.

Some of the many proposed theories suggest that the schizophrenic spectrum is usually linked with a decreased practical reasoning. Nevertheless, Qwen et al. disagreed and tested a phenomenological hypothesis that sounded absurd at the first sight: “Are people with schizophrenia more logical than healthy volunteers?” Results of the study were contrasting the usual prejudices, and clearly show that under the condition where common sense and logic conflict, people with schizophrenia reason more logically than healthy control group. Authors offer two logical conclusions – either the people with schizophrenia are better at logic, or worse at common sense [11].

Moreover, recent research questioned whether the scores of polygenic risk tests for schizophrenia and bipolar disorder can be used to predict creativity [12]. Since the artists and members of creative professions scored higher, initial concerns were valid, signifying that psychosis and creativity share genetic roots. It should be noted that the interpretation of results caused a rift between the scientists. Opponents, while not negating the link, classify it as “astonishingly weak”, meaning that its predictive power is limited due to miniature correlations [13]. Lastly, one thing we can be sure of is that researchers universally agree that mental illness is definitely neither sufficient nor necessary requirement for creativity [14].

3. Notable examples

A few can match brilliance and creativity of Nobel-Prize winning mathematician John Nash, whose life inspired the Academy Award winning movie A Beautiful Mind. Most renowned for his mayor contributions to the game theory, Nash earned a PhD degree and published key papers before developing the symptoms of schizophrenia [15]. Nash’s breakdown began in 1959, when he announced that he proved the century old Riemann Hypothesis [16]. Since he was already known as mathematical genius, two hundred and fifty mathematicians attended the lecture with great expectations [17]. As the lecture started, attendees realised that something is wrong – words were not connected, and calculations were outrageous. After reporting paranoid voices and bizarre beliefs, like being the king of Antarctica [18], he was subsequently diagnosed with paranoid subtype, which rarely allows the return to the previous level of achievement. Detailed analysis of the Nash’s psychological state is offered
by Capps, who analysed the predelusional, delusional and postdelusional period of his life [19-21]. Nash himself, when asked about early signs said “I can see there is a connection between not following normal thinking and doing creative thinking. I wouldn’t have had good scientific ideas if I had thought more normally” [22].

On the other hand, one of the most famous artists often linked with schizophrenia, Syd Barrett, was never officially diagnosed. A founding member of the psychedelic rock band Pink Floyd was a heavy drug user, who inspired many psychiatric diagnoses throughout his life. Most often mentioned one was simple schizophrenia. However, the above mentioned “cloud” caused by lumping of the diagnoses under the name schizophrenia during the 1970-s and 1980-s and complicated clinical picture caused by the drug use cast the shadow of doubt [23]. Campanella further argues that Barrett suffered from the Asperger’s syndrome, due to his unchanged behaviour since the early adolescent age.

4. Art as a function of illness

Bryan Charnley was a painter and sculptor, most prominent for the work he made while suffering from schizophrenia. Charnley’s *opus magnum* is a series of 17 self-portraits made while gradually lowering the dosage of prescribed medication, a feat which unfortunately resulted with his suicide [24]. Artist commented on each of the paintings, wrote the medications he took and described his thoughts and experiences. While looking at the collection, one can observe the gradual decay and anguish of once promising painter.

![Charnley's Self-Portrait Series](image)

*Fig. 1* Charnley’s *Self-Portrait Series*: a) 11th April (6 mg *Depixol*, 50 mg *Tryptisol*); b) 20th April (3 mg *Depixol*, 50 mg *Tryptisol*); c) 6th May (6 mg *Depixol*, 50 mg *Tryptisol*); d) 13th June (4.5 mg *Depixol*) [24]
5. Conclusion

Through time, concepts of madness and ingenuity often intertwine. In the popular culture, schizophrenia is often linked to creativity, despite being a severe mental illness. One of the reasons is most certainly a shroud of mystery surrounding it, coupled with the popularity of surrealism brought by Salvador Dali, Max Ernst and even Pink Floyd, among others. Highly creative people tend to perceive the world differently, and similar can be said for people with mental illnesses.

However, to unambiguously link the schizophrenia and creativity is a difficult task. Many studies indicate that connection exists, but causes and effects and are unclear. To illustrate, it is hard to say if illness helped John Nash with the game theory, or he would do better without it. To be creative, openness and intellect are viewed as key characteristics enabling one to generate highly creative solutions. Since schizophrenia is known to increase openness, it can prove beneficial, but it also lowers the common sense, negatively impacting intellectual capability.

Lastly, it is important to add that future efforts should be focused on removing the stigma associated with the illness. Stigma often leads to isolation and depression of patients, increasing their suffering. Modern medicine has luckily found effective treatments to provide positive outcome, mostly by using psycho and socio-therapy joined with the antipsychotics use. Once the patient is stabilised and in residual phase, it is up to society to accept the individual back.

REFERENCES


