

Is Majoring in the Creative Arts Associated with Psychopathology? An  
Exploration of Prevalence Rates of Bipolar Disorder, Depression, Anxiety, and  
Subsyndromal Psychotic Features Among Individuals Majoring in the Creative Arts

By

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

## ABSTRACT

Rising prevalence rates of mental health disorders among undergraduate college students have been well documented in recent years. Certain psychopathologies such as bipolar disorder, hypomania, and subsyndromal psychosis are more prevalent among individuals engaged in creative artistic vocations. Creative arts majors are analogous to creative arts vocations, yet research on the relationship between psychopathology and majoring in the creative arts has been inconsistent.

The study further examines the relationship between creative arts majors and psychopathology using a secondary analysis archival clinical data from the McShane Center for Psychological Services. 190 participants (prior patients) with exactly one documented undergraduate major and a completed Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI) were included in this study. Presence of potential psychopathology was measured by the PAI, a 344-item self-report instrument that assesses personality functioning and psychopathology. Chi-square tests examined data for differential likelihood of diagnosis and found non-creative arts majors had a higher likelihood of a mood disorder diagnosis than creative arts majors. Independent sample *t*-tests, and ANCOVAS that examined the relationship between collegiate major and psychopathologies found no subgroup differences in almost all PAI scales and subscales.

After accounting for demographic variables, creative arts majors had higher mean scores on the grandiosity subscale than non-creative arts majors; however, results were likely driven by acting majors. In particular, acting majors had higher mean mania, grandiosity, and irritability scores than non-creative and other creative arts majors.

Findings indicated that acting majors should be screened with multiple methods for risk of psychopathologies for early identification and treatment.

PREVIEW

# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Rising prevalence rates of mental health disorders among college and graduate students have been well documented in recent years (Brunner et al, 2014; Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2016; Gallagher, 2014; Krumrei et al., 2010). Researchers estimate that as many as one third of college students in the United States meet diagnostic criteria for a psychiatric disorder (Eisenberg et al., 2013). Earlier identification of at-risk individuals may be beneficial for treatment.

Many factors, including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation have been examined to better identify who is at risk (e.g., Effrig et al., 2011; Lockard et al., 2013). Additional studies have demonstrated that certain psychopathologies, namely bipolar disorder, hypomania, depression, anxiety and subsyndromal psychotic features, are more prevalent among individuals in creative artistic vocations than individuals in non-artistic vocations (e.g., Jung & Vartanian, 2018; Kyaga, et. al., 2011, 2013; Kyaga, 2018; Ludwig, 1992, 1998; Post, 1994). In particular then, this prevalence suggests that choice of collegiate major, analogous to the choice of a vocation, should be evaluated as a factor linked to higher rates of psychopathology.

To date, research into choice of collegiate major as a potential risk factor for psychopathology in the United States has been limited. Some large-scale studies into the relationship between creative arts majors and psychopathology have been conducted outside the U.S. where different educational systems abroad may limit the generalizability of their findings to the United States (Demir et al., 2019; MacCabe et. al., 2018; Papworth et. al., 2008; Siwek et al., 2013; Vellante, 2011).

Studies examining this question in the United States (Greason et al., 2015; Lee, 2019;) have limited applicability due to methodological limitations, such as choice of diagnostic assessment tool, sample population, and grouping together of humanities and artistic studies majors (Ajinkya et al., 2016). To date, the totality of the evidence is mixed regarding the relationship between major, particularly creative arts majors, and psychopathology. Additionally, one subgroup of creative arts majors, acting majors, have received little attention in the literature (Robb et al., 2018) despite growing evidence that they may face unique psychopathological vulnerabilities (Thomson & Jaque, 2017).

This study examined the link between majoring in the creative arts in the United States and prevalence rates of psychopathology as compared with majoring in other non-creative arts fields. It also provided a subgroup analysis of acting majors who may be at risk for different at types of psychopathologies as compared to other creative arts and non-creative arts majors (Robb et al., 2018; Thomson & Jaque, 2017). More broadly, this study will add to the body of literature connecting artistic vocational pursuits with psychopathology.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Definition of a Mental Disorder**

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5<sup>th</sup> ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013), a mental disorder is defined as:

a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning. Mental disorders are usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other important activities (APA, 2013).

Broadly speaking, a diagnosis of a mental disorder (also commonly referred to as a mental illness) requires that a set of symptoms, which generally cause significant impediments to areas of personal functioning, meet diagnostic criteria outlined in the DSM-5. However, individuals may not meet the full criteria for a mental disorder (i.e., they do not exhibit all symptoms or the level of severity indicative of a disorder) and yet display a need for treatment or care. The DSM-V asserts that subclinical disorders should also be addressed and treated (APA, 2013).

#### **Psychopathology in College Students**

An extensive body of research has been devoted to exploring the increase in mental health difficulties among college students (e.g., Brunner et al., 2014; Eisenberg et al., 2007; Gallagher, 2014; Oswalt et al., 2020). Literature on this topic suggests that college students report high levels of stress and anxiety (Leppink et al., 2016; Saleh et al., 2017), as well as clinically significant levels of depression (Brandy et al., 2015) in comparison to non-college students. Further, college students exhibit higher rates of clinical depression in comparison to the general population (Ibrahim et al., 2013), as well as significant rates of substance use disorders

(Arterberry et al., 2020). College students also exhibit high rates of suicide ideation and contemplation (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2016; Wyatt et al., 2017).

Variations in rates of psychopathology have been compared between different collegiate student groups, for example: racial and ethnic subgroups (Lockard et al., 2013; Constantine et al., 1997); different nationalities (Yakushko, et al., 2008); sexual orientations (McAleavey et al., 2011); and gender identities (Effrig et al., 2011). While some studies have explored rates of psychopathology across some academic majors, few studies to date have explored rates of psychopathology (specifically Bipolar Disorder, Hypomania, and subsyndromal psychotic symptom) in creative arts majors, particularly in comparison to the number of studies devoted to STEM and Humanities majors in the United States.

### **Study Definition of an Artist/Student Artist**

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary (n.d.), defines an artist as someone who practices an imaginative art, or one who is skilled in the fine arts area. Similarly, the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000) defines an artist as “one, such as a painter sculptor or writer, who is able by virtue of imagination and talent or skill to create works of aesthetic value, especially in the fine arts” (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000, p. 102). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) provides an even broader definition of an artist to include “any person who creates or gives creative expression to, or recreates works of art, who considers his artistic creation to be an essential part of his life, who contributes in this way to the development of art and culture...” (UNESCO, 1980, p. 149).

Notably, the United States’ National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) provides a more succinct and concrete definition of the word artist based upon federal data sources from the US

Census and US Bureau of Labor and Statistics. Specifically, the NEA (2019) defines an artist as an individual who works as, or in, one of the following 11 occupational categories: Acting; Architecture/Architects; Announcers; Dancers and Choreographers; Designers; Fine Arts, Arts Director and Animator/Animation; Music/Musician and Singers; Entertainer; Photography/Photographer; Producer and Director; and Writers and Authors. Extending the NEA's definition, a student artist could thus be conceptualized as an individual majoring in, or studying, one of the above-mentioned disciplines in a college or university setting.

### **Artists and Psychopathology**

The relationship between artists/artistic creativity and psychopathology has long been a topic of interest dating back to prominent Greek philosophers and thinkers (Simonton, 2014). For example, both Plato and Aristotle believed that the thought processes of creative artists were eccentric and aberrant (Abraham, 2014).

In his *Phaedrus*, Plato commented on the relationship between artistic creative achievement and psychopathology stating that “madness, provided it comes as the gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings” (Plato, c. 428 BC- c. 348 BC; Sussman, 2007, p. 21). Aristotle (384-322 BC) asserted that artists have “an association with madness and frenzied inspiration” (Albert & Runco, 1999, p. 18). Kyaga (2018) notes that Aristotle, in *Probelmatta XXX*, which was written by his student Theophrast (371-287 BC), posed the following question: “Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy, politics, poetry, or the arts are clearly melancholics and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by the black bile?” (Aristotle, BC; Jung & Vartanian, 2018; Kyaga, 2018, p. 114).

In a review of this topic, Sussman (2007) highlighted numerous well-known artists who appeared to have suffered from mental illness. Examples of afflicted preeminent artists included



poet T.S. Elliot, painter Georgia O'Keefe, and composer Irving Berlin, all of whom were institutionalized at some point in their lives. Further examples include iconic artists who appeared to have presented with symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation, such as Vincent Van Gogh and Virginia Woolf, both of whom ended their own lives (Sussman). Other researchers, such as Rothenberg (1990), identified a number of creative individuals who appear to have exhibited symptoms of psychosis, such as writer Sylvia Plath, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and composer Robert Schumann.

In a frequently cited and seminal study on this topic, Ludwig (1995) explored prevalence rates of psychopathology among prominent individuals across various occupations. In this historio-metric study, Ludwig (1995) investigated the biographies of 1,004 eminent individuals (an individual was considered eminent if a biography had been written about them) throughout history. Findings of this study suggested that individuals in artistic occupations (e.g., painters, writers, musicians, theater actors, etc.) exhibited significantly higher rates of depression, mania, anxiety, and psychosis as compared to individuals in non-artistic occupations (e.g., business, politics, military, natural sciences, etc.).

Post (1994) also explored psychopathology among 291 renowned men in the fields of science, philosophy, politics, and the arts. Using biographical data, Post diagnosed these individuals (when applicable), and concluded that artists (such as visual artists and writer) appeared to exhibit higher rates of depression and personality disorders as compared to individuals in non-artistic fields.

### **Artists and Mood Disorders**

The literature suggests that artists exhibit higher rates of mood disorders as compared to individuals in non-artistic occupations (Andreasen & Glick, 1988; Ludwig, 1992; Richards &

Kinney, 1990). For example, a seminal and influential study conducted by Nancy Andreasen (1987) compared rates of psychopathology among 30 writers (members of the Iowa Writer's Workshop) to rates of psychopathology in an age-matched control group of individuals in non-artistic occupations (e.g., law, business, administration, etc.). Using structured interviews, Andreasen (1987) found that writers were more likely to have mood disorders, particularly depression and bipolar disorders, as compared to individuals in the control group. Results further indicated that writers were approximately four times more likely to be diagnosed with bipolar disorder as compared to individuals in the control group.

Another frequently cited study on this topic was conducted by Jamison (1989). The author of this study examined rates of treatment for mood disorders among 47 award-winning British artists and authors. After interviewing these individuals about their psychiatric history, Jamison found that a significantly greater percentage of these individuals suffered from bipolar disorder than would be expected based on the prevalence of bipolar disorder in the general population.

A large-scale study conducted in Sweden explored prevalence rates of mood disorders and schizophrenia among individuals in creative artistic occupations (Kyaga et al. 2011). Using national Swedish registries, Kyaga et al. (2011) examined the professional and psychiatric information of around 300,000 individuals. Results of this study showed that individuals who worked in an artistic occupation were more likely to be diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia (as per hospital records) than individuals who worked in non-artistic occupations (e.g., accountants, auditors, natural science, etc.). However, Kyaga et al. (2011) did not find a similar association for unipolar depression. Another study, using epidemiological data on more than 20,000 participants, also found that individuals diagnosed with bipolar disorder were

overrepresented in artistic occupations as compared to non-artistic occupations (Tremblay et al., 2010).

In a follow-up study, to date the largest study of its kind, Kyaga et al. (2013) explored rates of bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, unipolar depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, ADHD, and substance abuse in individuals across various occupations. Using a new dataset, Kyaga et al. (2013) examined the professional and psychiatric histories of more than one million individuals found in Swedish national registries. Results validated Kyaga and colleagues' (2011) findings that individuals in artistic occupations were more likely to be diagnosed with bipolar disorder than individuals in non-artistic occupations. However, this study was unable to replicate earlier findings with regard to schizophrenia.

In an attempt to extend research on this topic to a younger population, Young, Winner, and Cordes (2013) explored rates of depression in more than 2,000 adolescents (aged 15-16 years) involved in various afterschool programs. Using the U.S. National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Young et al. (2013) compared rates of depression in adolescents involved only in arts programs (e.g., lessons in music, drama or art clubs, etc.) to adolescents involved only in sports (e.g., sports teams, sports lessons, etc.). This study found that adolescents involved in afterschool arts programs had higher scores on a depressive symptom measure (Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale, CES-D) than their counterparts who were not involved in afterschool arts programs.

While the above-mentioned studies provide support for a relationship between artists, affective disorders (particularly bipolar disorder), and generally high rates of psychopathology (e.g., Ludwig 1995; Post, 1994), these studies have also been subject to important criticisms (Kaufman, 2016) that may undermine the validity and generalizability of their results. Critics

have argued that some of these studies exhibit significant methodological limitations (Becker, 2001; Glazer, 2009; Kaufman, 2016; Simonton, 2014). For example, Rothenberg (1990) noted that control groups in some studies were not well matched (e.g., Andreasen, 1987; Jamison, 1989). Additionally, Kaufman (2016) and Rothenberg (1990) noted weaknesses in the diagnostic assessment of participants, such as the use of postmortem diagnosis in famous artists and the diagnosing of artists without assessment measures (e.g., Jamison, 1989; Ludwig, 1995; Post, 1994).

Other studies have explored the broader relationship between mood disorders and creativity, a hallmark ability associated with artists, which can be defined/understood as a multifaceted concept that refers to the ability to produce ideas or products that are original and appropriate/effective (Kaufman, 2016; Runco & Jaeger, 2012; Simonton, 2012). Some research has found that individuals with hypomania exhibit higher scores on measures of creativity as compared to healthy individuals (Batey & Furnham, 2006; Lloyd-Evans et al., 2006; Zabelina et al., 2014); however, other studies have not replicated these findings (Silvia & Kimbrel, 2010; Thys et al., 2014). In a review of this topic, Kaufman (2016) asserted that discrepancies between research findings may largely be attributed to methodological issues, such as variations in measures of creativity and mental illness, sample sizes, and population.

### **Artists and Psychosis/Schizotypy Proneness**

Research has linked creativity and artists to psychoticism and schizotypy (Acar & Runco, 2012). For example, Eysenck (2003) theorized that artists are vulnerable to psychotic disorders because of unique cognitive processes associated with their personality type. Eysenck's theory of personality (1952, 1967) proposes three major personality dimensions that exist on a continuum. Most noteworthy is Eysenck's personality dimension of Psychoticism (P), which is defined as a

“dispositional variable or trait predisposing people to functional disorders of all types” (Eysenck, 1995, p. 203), and in particular, to psychotic disorders.

As a continuum, P can range from low P, characterized by altruistic, conventional, and empathic traits, to high P, characterized by impulsive, schizoid, aggressive and schizophrenic traits (Acar & Runco, 2012; Eysenck, 1995). High P traits share common underlying cognitive styles of thinking associated with psychotic disorders, particularly overinclusive and loose thinking (e.g., loose and wide associated networks), that in turn makes one more vulnerable to developing a psychotic disorder. Significantly, these traits are also common cognitive styles among artists (Eysenck, 2003).

Studies comparing psychoticism scores (as measured by the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire [EPQ P; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975]) of artists with non-artists lend support to Eysenck’s theory that artists tend to fall on the higher end of the P spectrum (thus exhibiting more subclinical psychotic symptoms as compared to non-artist counterparts). For example, Götz and Götz (1979) found that their sample of 257 artists had significantly higher psychoticism scores than their non-artists counterparts. Similarly, Booker, Fearn, and Francis (2001) found that psychoticism scores in a sample of 157 artists were significantly higher than a comparison the scores of a group of non-artists; Merten and Fischer (1999) also found that psychoticism scores were significantly higher among 40 writers and actors as compared to the scores of 40 non-artist controls. Further, a study conducted by Pearson and Clayden (1982) found that male graphic design art students had significantly higher psychoticism scores (as measured by EPQ) than the scores of non-graphic design art students.

Importantly, however, a large meta-analytic review conducted by Acar and Runco (2012) on this topic found mixed results. After analyzing thirty-two empirical studies that explored the

relationship between creativity, artists, and Eysenck's psychoticism dimension, the authors found that psychoticism scores were significantly correlated only with creativity and artists when the EPQ measure was used to measure psychoticism; other measures of psychoticism showed no significant correlation.

Schizotypy is a further subclinical disorder related to creativity, artists, and individuals in artistic creative fields (Abraham & Windman, 2008; Claridge, 1997). Schizotypy, a term originally coined Meehl (Meehl, 1962), is a construct that refers to "a set of behavioral, affective and cognitive eccentricities, which constitute the foundation of psychotic disorders" (Baas et al., 2016, p. 670).

Schizotypy is a multidimensional construct (Kwapil & Barrantes-Vidal, 2015) that can broadly be grouped into the following categories: (1) positive symptoms, which refer to the subclinical positive symptoms of schizophrenia, such as unusual experiences, impulsive behavior, hallucinations, magical thinking, and cognitive disorganization; (2) negative symptoms, which refer to the subclinical negative variants of schizophrenia, such as social withdrawal, anhedonia, or asocial behaviors (Baas et al., 2016; Kwapil et al., 2015). Notably, several genetic, cognitive and brain MRI studies show an overlap between schizotypy and schizophrenia, thus providing support for a close connection between the two (Crabtree & Newton-John, 2019; Wang et al., 2017).

Research by Claridge (1994, 1997) suggests that schizotypy "is an indicator of psychosis proneness" that exists "on a continuum between normal experience and schizophrenia" (Carson, 2014, p. 203). This proposition has been backed by empirical research (e.g., Eaton et al., 1995; Modenato & Draganski, 2015; van Os, Hanssen, Bijl, & Vollerbergh, 2001). While schizotypy traits can be found in healthy individuals, schizotypy can turn into schizotypal personality

disorder if symptoms worsen, for example, as a result of environmental and genetic factors, PTSD, and substance abuse (Carson, 2011; Claridge, 1997; Rose & Duka, 2007).

Significantly, several research studies have shown that artists exhibit elevated positive schizotypy traits (Brod, 1997; Nettle, 2006; Schuldberg, 2001). For example, Burch, Pavelis, Hemsley, and Corr (2006) found that a group of student visual artists scored higher on a frequently used measure of schizotypy (Short Oxford-Liverpool Inventory of Feelings and Experiences [O-LIFE]; Mason, Claridge, & Jackson, 1995) than did their non-artist control counterparts. In particular, Burch et al. (2006) found that student artists scored higher on the positive-schizotypy scale than did the non-artists comparison group. Rawlings and Locarnini (2008) also found that a group of professional artists exhibited significantly higher positive schizotypy scores on the O-LIFE (Mason, et al., 1995) as compared to a control group of mathematicians, physicists, and biological scientists. Similarly, Nettle and Clegg (2006) found that a group of artists scored higher on the positive schizotypy trait of Unusual Experiences on the O-LIFE (Mason et al., 1995) as compared to a control group of non-artists.-

Nelson and Rawlings (2010) found that a sample of 100 artists exhibited elevated positive schizotypy scores on the O-LIFE (Mason et al., 1995) as compared to published normative data. Additionally, Holt (2019) found that a group of 41 artists exhibited significantly higher scores on positive schizotypy scales (O-LIFE; Mason et al., 2005) as compared to normative data.

While the research mentioned above supports the theory that artists are psychosis-prone (as artists exhibited high positive schizotypy scores), it must be noted that “artists” were inconsistently defined across studies (Holt, 2019). For example, while some studies clearly defined an artist as someone involved in an artistic occupation or as a student studying in an

artistic field (Rawlings and Locarnini, 2008), others defined an artist more vaguely, such as someone who engages in artistic pursuits frequently or self-defines as an artist (Nelson & Rawlings, 2010; Nettle & Clegg, 2006). The variations in definitions used may thus limit the comparability and generalizability of these studies' findings.

### **The Underlying Connection between Artists/Creative Artistic Vocational Interest and Psychopathology**

Evidence supports a strong association between artists/artistic vocational interest and psychopathology with the mediating factor of personality shedding light on the etiology of this relationship. In other words, personality may serve as the bridge between artists/artistic vocational interest and psychopathology (Carson, 2011; Holland, 1997; Markon et al., 2005; Miller & Tal, 2007; Srivastava & Ketter, 2010).

Personality can be broadly defined as “enduring styles of thinking, feeling, and acting that characterize an individual” (Costa & McCrae, 1995, p. 124). Personality traits, shaped by complex biological and environmental processes, are stable, measurable factors (Funder, 2015; Hampson & Goldberg, 2006). Notably, personality traits have been shown to correlate with choice of vocation (Holland, 1959, 1973, 1985, 1997). Certain personality traits have also been associated with reduced latent inhibition (LI), which has been linked with specific types of psychopathologies, namely schizophrenia and schizotypy (Baruch et al., 1988; Lubow et al., 1995). Therefore, by transitive process, it is reasonable to infer that artistic vocational interest and psychopathology are related to each other via the common, underlying variable—personality. This association is supported by research predicated on various personality and vocational interest theories, including those proposed by Holland (1959; 1997), Costa and McCrae (1992), and Carson (2011).