

Creativity and Madness

The Myth and Truth

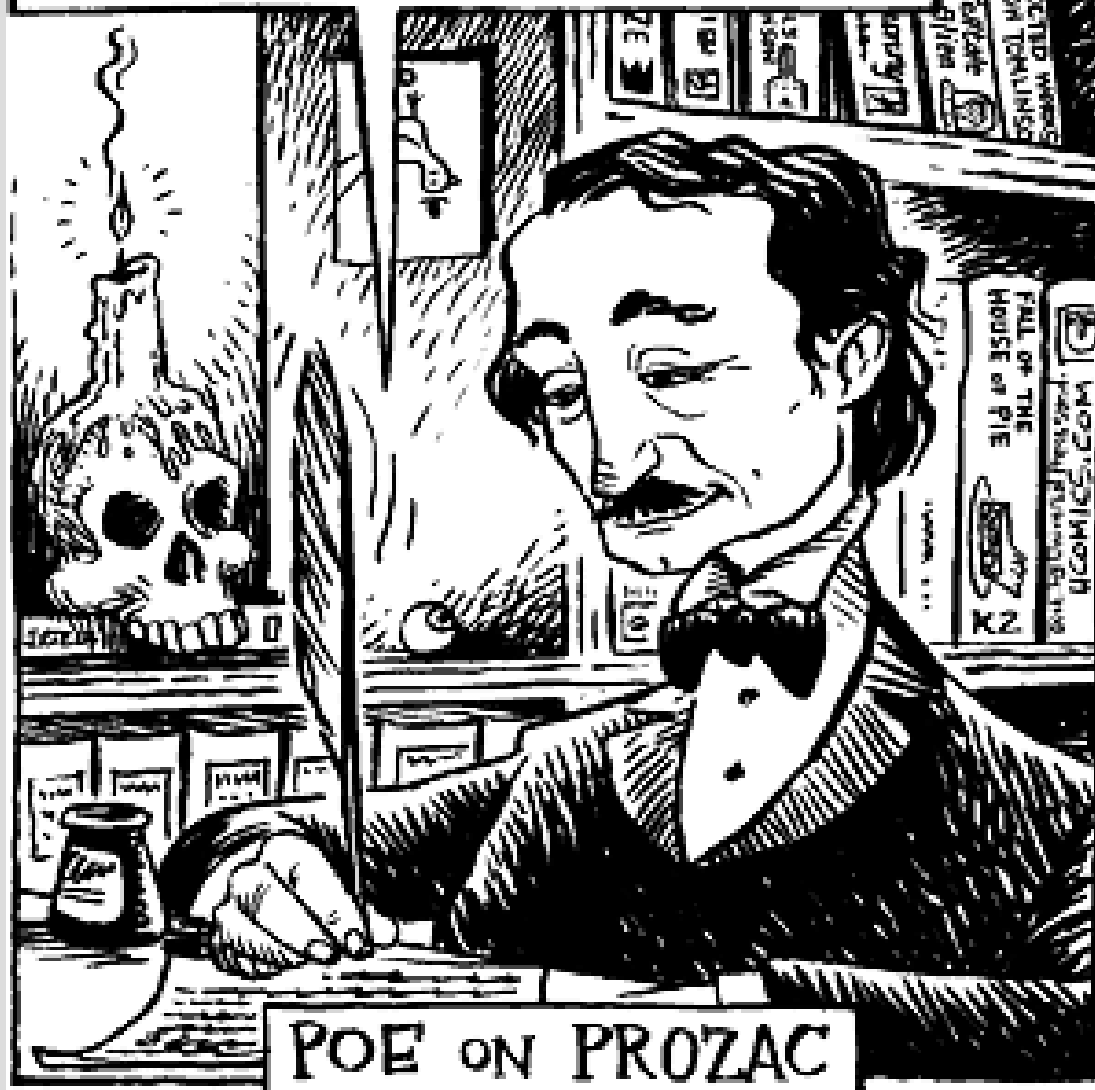
Conceptions of the Mad Genius

- ❑ Aristotle: "Those who have become eminent in philosophy, politics, poetry, and the arts have all had tendencies toward melancholia."
 - ❑ Seneca: "No great genius has ever existed without some touch of madness."
 - ❑ Shakespeare: "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet/ Are of imagination all compact."
 - ❑ Dryden: "Great Wits are sure to Madness near ally'd,/ And thin Partitions do their Bounds divide."
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Conceptions of the Mad Genius

- 1895 article in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* listed the four possible results of an inferior genetic endowment:
 - “*First*, and most prominent in the order of frequency is an early death.
 - *Second*, he may help swell the criminal ranks.
 - *Third*, he may become mentally deranged and ultimately find his way into a hospital for the insane.
 - *Fourth*, and least frequently, he startles the world by an invention or discovery in science or by an original composition of great merit in art, music or literature. He is then styled a genius.”
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Quoth the Raven, "Hey, things
could be a lot worse."



POE ON PROZAC

Conceptions of the Mad Genius

- Psychiatrists > psychopathology
 - especially the psychoanalytic tradition of psychobiographies: “pathographies”
 - Humanistic psychologists > mental health
 - echoed in current “positive psychology” movement
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Truth or Myth?

- ☐ Empirical Findings
 - ☐ Theoretical Interpretation
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The empirical findings

- ☐ Historiometric studies
 - ☐ Psychiatric studies
 - ☐ Psychometric studies
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Historiometric studies

- Here historical data are subjected to objective and quantitative analyses.
 - In particular, the biographies of eminent creators are systematically analyzed to gauge the presence and intensity of symptoms associated with various mental illnesses.
 - Such historiometric inquiries lead to four conclusions.
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Historiometric studies: Four Conclusions

- *First*, the rate and intensity of symptoms appear to be higher among eminent creators than in the general population.
 - Although the exact increment depends on the specific definition used, a rough estimate is that highly creative individuals are about twice as likely to experience symptoms of mental disorder relative to otherwise comparable noncreative individuals.
 - Depression seems to be the most common symptom, along with the correlates of alcoholism and suicide.
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Historiometric studies: Four Conclusions

- *Second*, the more eminent the creator, the higher is the expected rate and intensity.
 - *Third*, the rate and intensity of symptoms varies according to the specific domain of creativity.
 - For example, psychopathology is higher among artistic creators than among scientific creators.
 - Thus, according to one study, 87% of famous poets experienced psychopathology whereas only 28% of the natural scientists did so, a rate closer to the population baseline (see figure).
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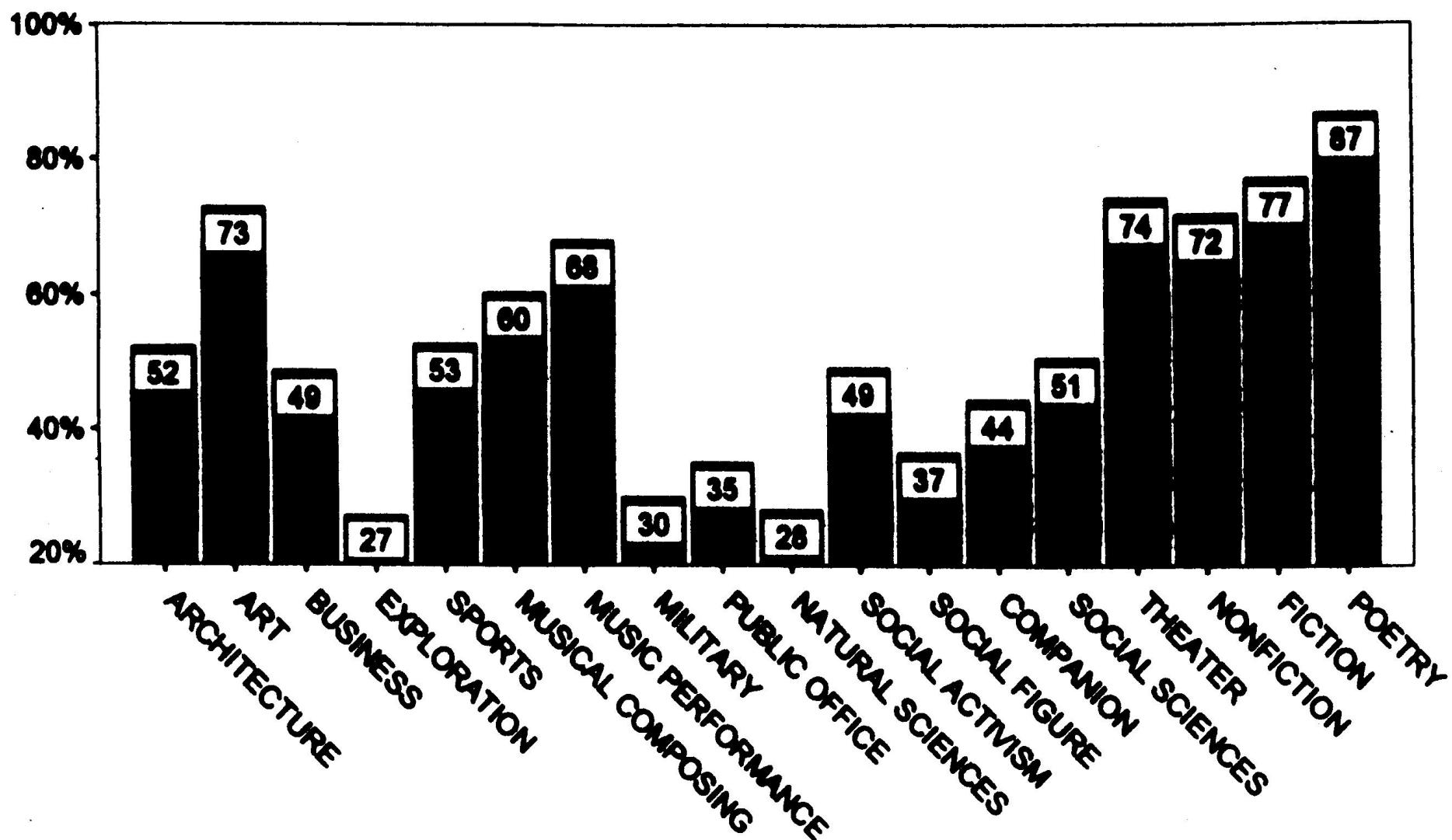
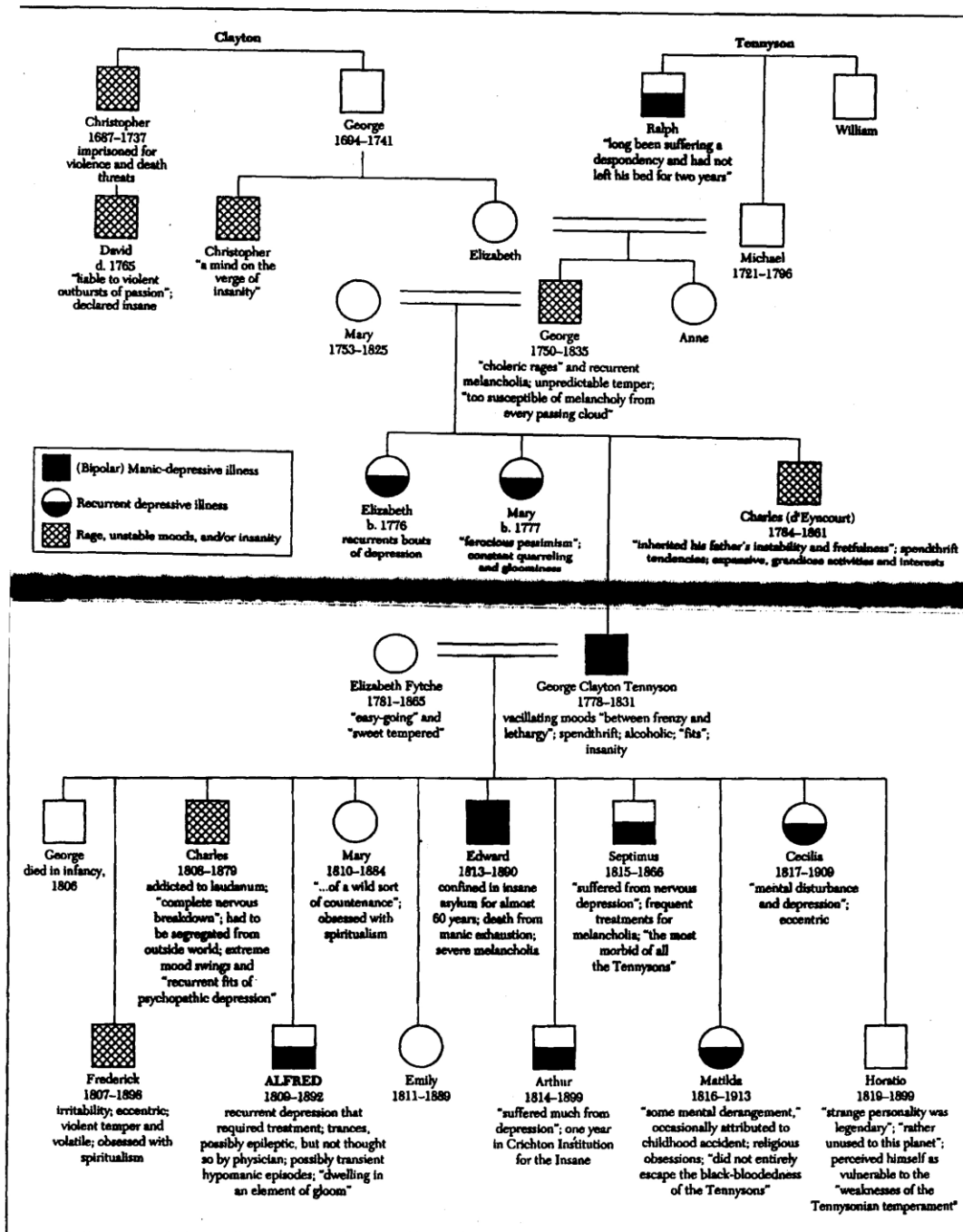


Figure 7.8. Lifetime rate of any mental disorder.

Historiometric studies: Four Conclusions

- *Fourth*, family lines that produce eminent creators also tend to be characterized by a higher rate and intensity of symptoms.
 - Hence, there may be a common genetic component to both creativity and psychopathology.
 - For example, the Tennyson family.
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Alfred, Lord Tennyson Partial Family History



Psychiatric studies:

- Here the evidence depends on the incidence of clinical diagnosis and therapeutic treatment in samples of mostly contemporary creators.
 - Hence, it does not require retrospective analysis as in historiometric studies,
 - and the assessment of psychopathology usually reflects modern diagnostic standards.
 - Even so, such research leads to four conclusions that reinforce what was found in historiometric research.
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Psychiatric studies: Four Conclusions

- ❑ *First*, distinguished creators again display a higher rate and intensity of symptoms.
 - ❑ *Second*, this relationship is especially strong for those engaged in artistic creativity.
 - ❑ *Third*, depression, alcoholism, and suicide again appear to be the most common indicators.
 - ❑ *Fourth*, creativity and mental illness again tends to run in the same family lines.
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Psychometric studies

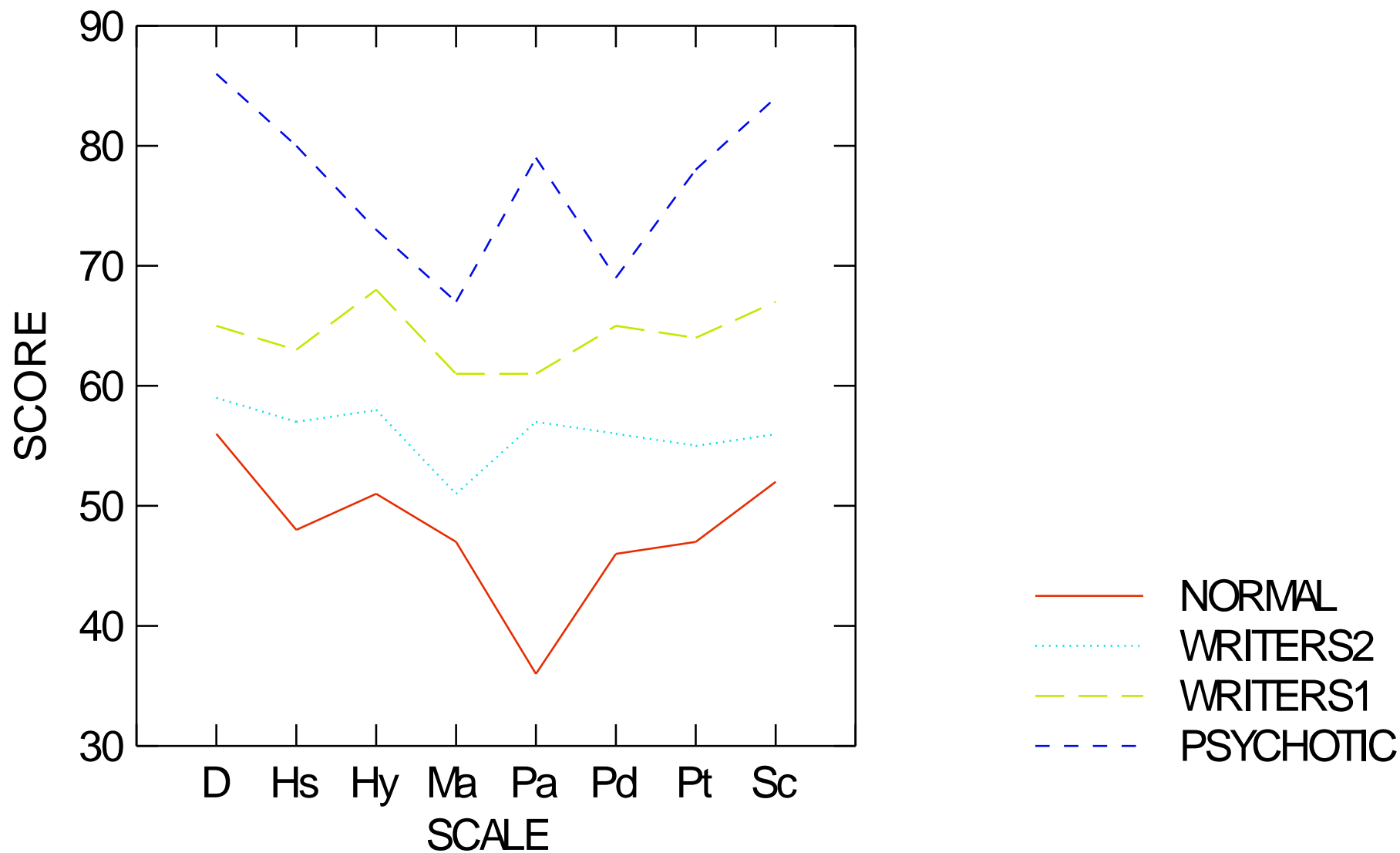
- ❑ Here standard assessment instruments are applied to contemporary creators.
 - The sampled creators either
 - ❑ vary substantially in creative achievement, or
 - ❑ are compared to a non-creative control group.
 - The psychometric measures include the
 - ❑ Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI),
 - ❑ the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ).
 - This work leads to three corroborating conclusions and two elaborating conclusions.
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Psychometric studies: Three Corroborating Conclusions

- *First*, highly creative individuals score above normal level on several dimensions associated with psychopathology.
 - e.g., creativity is positively correlated with psychoticism scores on the EPQ.
 - *Second*, the higher the level of creativity displayed, the higher the scores tend to be on the clinical scales.
 - *Third*, artistic creators still have more elevated scores than do scientific creators.
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Psychometric studies: Two Elaborating Conclusions

- *First*, although highly creative individuals tend to exhibit elevated scores on certain symptoms, their scores lie somewhere between the normal and abnormal ranges.
 - E.g., although successful writers score higher than normals on most MMPI clinical scales,
 - and highly creative writers score higher still,
 - scores for both groups remain below those received by psychotic samples (see figure).
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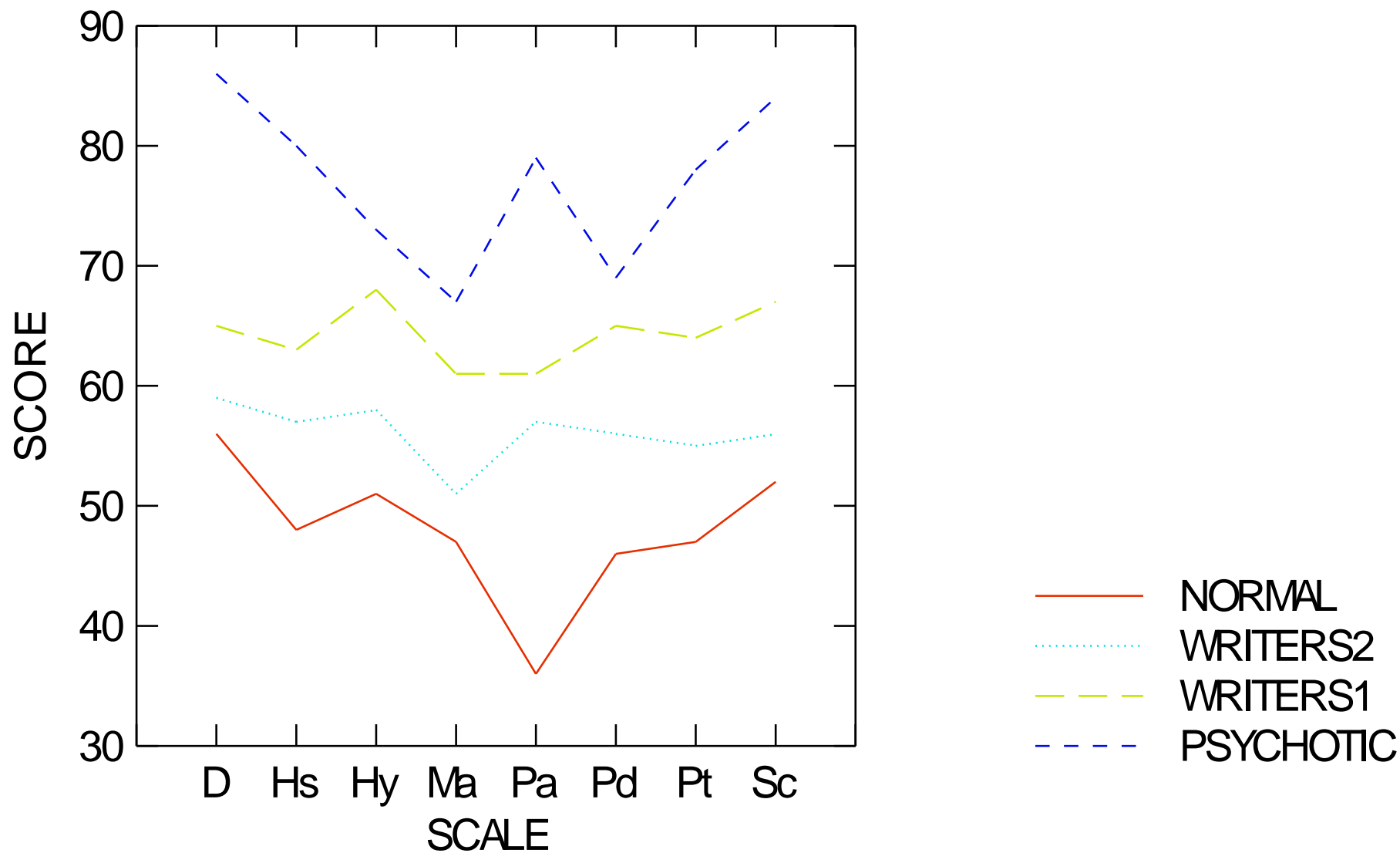
Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI)

☐ Scales

- D = Depression,
- Hs = Hypochondriasis,
- Hy = Hysteria,
- Ma = Hypomania,
- Pa = Paranoia,
- Pd = Psychopathic deviation,
- Pt = Psychasthenia,
- Sc = Schizophrenia.

☐ Groups:

- NORMAL = adult controls,
 - WRITERS2 = successful writers,
 - WRITERS1 = highly creative writers, and
 - PSYCHOTIC = typical psychotics
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Psychometric studies: Two Elaborating Conclusions

- ❑ At these moderate levels the individual will possess traits that can actually be considered adaptive from the standpoint of creative behavior.
 - ❑ For instance, higher than average scores on psychoticism are associated with independence and nonconformity, features that support creativity.
 - ❑ In addition, elevated scores on psychoticism are associated with the capacity for defocused attention - enabling ideas to enter the mind that would normally be filtered out during information processing.
 - ❑ This less restrictive thinking is also associated with openness to experience, a cognitive inclination that is positively associated with creativity.
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Psychometric studies: Two Elaborating Conclusions

- *Second*, creative individuals score high on other characteristics that would seem to dampen the effects of any psychopathological symptoms.
 - In particular, creators display high levels of ego-strength and self-sufficiency.
 - Thus, they can exert meta-cognitive control over their symptoms, taking advantage of bizarre thoughts rather than having the bizarre thoughts take advantage of them.
 - And, creators have above-average intelligence.
 - Creators do not necessarily have genius-grade IQs,
 - but they do have sufficient information-processing power to select, develop, elaborate, and refine original, even “crazy” ideas into creative contributions.
 - Empirical example: 140 Eminent Scientists on 16 PF
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TABLE 1

Mean 16 Personality Factor Profile of Eminent Researchers ($N = 140$)
in Physics, Biology, and Psychology

| Personality Dimension Label at Lower Pole | Mean Stens | Plotted Mean Sten Scores | | | | | | | | | | Personality Dimension Label at Upper Pole | |
|--|---------------|--------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|--|------------------|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | | |
| A- Schizothymia | 3.36 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | Cyclothymia | A+ |
| B- Low intelligence | 7.64 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | High intelligence | B+ |
| C- Low ego strength | 5.44 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | High ego strength | C+ |
| E- Low dominance | 6.62 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | High dominance | E+ |
| F- Desurgency | 3.15 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | Surgency | F+ |
| G- Low group superego | 4.10 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | High group superego | G+ |
| H- Threctia | 6.01 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | Parmia | H+ |
| I- Harria | 7.05 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | Premia | I+ |
| L- Low protension | 5.36 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | High protension | L+ |
| M- Praxernia | 5.36 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | Autia | M+ |
| N- Simplicity | 5.50 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | Shrewdness | N+ |
| O- Low guilt proneness | 4.38 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | High guilt proneness | O+ |
| Q ₁ - Conservatism | 7.00 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | Radicalism | Q ₁ + |
| Q ₂ - Low self-sufficiency | 7.52 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | High self-sufficiency | Q ₂ + |
| Q ₃ - Low self-sentiment | 6.44 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | High self-sentiment | Q ₃ + |
| Q ₄ - Low ergic tension | 4.91 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | High ergic tension | Q ₄ + |

Cattell's 16 PF

- ☐ **schizothymic - withdrawn, skeptical, internally preoccupied, precise, and critical.**
 - ☐ **desurgent - introspectiveness, restraint, brooding, and solemnity of manner.**
-

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| H- Threctia | 6.01 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | Parmia | H+ |
| I- Harria | 7.05 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | Premia | I+ |
| L- Low protension | 5.36 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | High protension | L+ |
| M- Praxernia | 5.36 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | Autia | M+ |
| N- Simplicity | 5.50 | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | Shrewdness | N+ |
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Theoretical interpretation

□ Two key questions:

- Do these results imply that creativity and psychopathology are intimately connected?
 - Are genius and madness tantamount to the same thing?
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Theoretical interpretation

- Answer to first question: Yes
 - Various indicators of mental health appear to be negatively correlated with creative achievement.
 - This is evident from historiometric, psychiatric, and psychometric research.
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Theoretical interpretation

- Answer to the second question: No.
 - Few creative individuals can be considered truly mentally ill.
 - Indeed, outright disorder usually inhibits rather than helps creative expression.
 - Furthermore, a large proportion of creators exhibit no symptoms, at least not to any measurable degree.
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Theoretical interpretation

- Instead, creativity shares certain cognitive and dispositional traits with particular symptoms, and that the degree of that commonality is contingent on the level and type of creativity displayed.
 - More specifically, the relationship can be expressed in the following four points:
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Theoretical interpretation

- *First*, creativity requires the cognitive ability and the dispositional willingness to “think outside the box,” to explore novel, unconventional, and even odd possibilities, to be open to serendipitous events and fortuitous results, to imagine the implausible or to consider the unlikely.
 - From this requirement arises the need for creators to have such traits as defocused attention, divergent thinking, openness to experience, independence, and nonconformity – namely, the “creativity cluster” of traits.
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Theoretical interpretation

- *Second*, the higher the level of creativity, the higher the likelihood that the individual manifests this cluster.
 - Yet, domains vary in how much they need this cluster.
 - For instance, scientific creativity tends to be more constrained by logic and fact than artistic creativity. Accordingly, this cluster of attributes will be more apparent in artists than in scientists.
 - Moreover, artists operating in formal, classical, or academic styles will operate under more constraints than artists working in more expressive, subjective, or romantic styles. So, the former will exhibit the creativity cluster less than the latter.
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Theoretical interpretation

- *Third*, because some psychopathological symptoms correlate with several of the characteristics making up the creativity cluster, moderate amounts of these symptoms will be positively associated with creative behavior.
 - Furthermore, more creative individuals will display these traits to a higher degree.
 - Creators operating in less constrained domains will also exhibit these symptoms to a greater extent.
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Theoretical interpretation

- *Fourth*, psychopathology is not the only possible source for the creativity cluster.
 - The environment can also nurture creative development.
 - Although some of these developmental influences are also associated with psychopathology, others are not.
 - On the one hand, creative development is frequently associated with traumatic experiences in childhood or adolescence, experiences that may also contribute to depression and suicidal behavior.
 - On the other hand, development is also linked to an enriched and diverse intellectual and cultural environment, an environment that is neutral with respect to psychopathology.
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Conclusion

- ❑ Psychopathology and creativity are closely related, sharing many traits and antecedents,
 - ❑ but they are not identical, and outright psychopathology is negatively associated with creativity.
 - ❑ This fits what Dryden said about the “thin partition” separating “great wits” and “madness.”
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Conclusion

- ❑ Or, as the highly creative but not truly crazy Surrealist painter Salvador Dali once expressed the distinction:
 - ❑ "The only difference between me and a madman is that I'm not mad."
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