The Portrayal of Mental Illness and the Mentally Ill in Films

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A 2003 Report from the President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health states that a “stigma refers to a cluster of negative attitudes and beliefs that motivate the general public to fear, reject, avoid and discriminate against people with mental illnesses.” The media, more specifically films, seem to contribute to this stigma that comes along with mental illness, skewing the majority of the public’s perception of how people suffering from mental illness act and providing the audience with false information about certain diseases.

A 2002 survey study conducted by Arboleda-Florez showed some common misconceptions held by the public. Some of the misconceptions that seemed to be most prevalent were ideas that those who were afflicted with a mental disability or illness are dangerous, developmentally disabled, of low intelligence, have communication disorders and/or are dysfunctional and lack desires. Also, there is evidence that non-fiction media may have a role in supporting these stigmas by “framing” the mentally ill with the above traits (Edney 2004).

In 1991, Hyler and colleagues conducted content analyses on the quality of the portrayal of mentally ill in movies. Hyler noted the various “framing” techniques which distinguished the mentally ill character from all the other characters (e.g., close-up shots, discordant music, atmospheric lighting, setting selection, and scene juxtaposition). Hyler’s finding support those of Edney. Also, derogatory language like “crazy,” “psycho,” “deranged,” and “loony,” is often used by the other characters to establish the fact that the mentally ill character is, in fact, mentally ill. Finally, Hyler established that a majority of mentally ill characters are often given distinctive and unattractive features to once again, instill in the audience the fact that the character has a mental illness. Hyler then classified these portrayals into six stereotypes that the film industry commonly portrays: (1) the homicidal maniac, (2) the rebellious free spirit, (3) the
enlightened member of society, (4) the female patient as seductress, (5) the narcissistic parasite, and (6) the zoo specimen. Following Hyler’s research, two other negative stereotypes, the simpleton and the failure/victim, emerged (Wahl, 1995).

Movies can also create misconceptions about specific diseases, leading the general public to believe that some diseases are more common when, in reality, they are quite rare. Certain diseases, like dissociative identity disorder, amnesia and schizophrenia make for great entertainment and appear most commonly in movies involving characters with mental illness, but according to WebMD, only 0.1% to 1% of the population of the United States has been diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder. It’s also estimated that there are 5.2 cases of amnesia per 100,000 people, and that only 1.1% of the population suffer from schizophrenia. These numbers are very small. Movies also present misleading information about how people suffering from certain diseases act. For example, in Shutter Island, Leonardo DiCaprio plays a man with schizophrenia in a mental institution. The movie depicts him as having two personalities, yet in reality, schizophrenics do not have multiple personalities, they experience hallucinations. The same goes for the movie Me, Myself and Irene, where Jim Carey plays a schizophrenic man who takes on multiple personalities, an incorrect portrayal of schizophrenia (Diefenbach, 1995; Byrne 2000; Dissociative Identity Disorder 1).

Ultimately, violence seems to be the number one misconception about people with mental illness. The Field Institute of The California Department of Mental Health conducted a poll of 1,500 California adults (ages 18 and older) and asked whether they agreed with the statement, “A person who is diagnosed as schizophrenic is more likely to commit a violent crime than a normal person.” Sixty-one percent say that they “definitely” or “probably” agreed. Media, whether it created or simply supports the notion, does not shy away from the stereotype that a
vast majority of people with mental illness are violent or have violent tendencies. A content analysis of prime-time American television shows in the early 1980s concluded that 17% of these shows depict a character as mentally ill. Of these mentally ill characters, 73% were depicted as being violent and 23% as homicidal, as opposed to the 40% and 10% of the “normal” characters, respectively (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1981).

Due to the overwhelming amount of misleading information about mental illness and those who suffer from mental illness, many researchers have begun to look at whether this false light shed by the media affects how “normal” people react towards actual encounters with the mentally ill in everyday life. Another notion is whether positive or negative portrayals of the mentally ill in entertainment seem to change people’s mental schemas about those with mental illness.

In all fairness, not all films containing people with mental illnesses portray them in a negative light. Many movies shed light on those with mental illnesses who have overcome the odds and are the “heroes” of the story. For example, Rainman, I am Sam, Radio, It’s Kind of a Funny Story and many other films have been recognized for their positive portrayal of the mentally ill.

Farnall and Smith (1999), while studying the reactions to people with disabilities, comparing personal contact versus viewing of specific media portrayals, found that viewers of positive portrayals of the disabled on television programs and in the movies were more likely to perceive discrimination and less likely to say they had negative emotions when encountering people with disabilities, but more often said they were uncomfortable with them. Farnall and Smith conducted a five-part survey of 1,257 American adults. The first part of the survey asked about viewing of specific media portrayals (Children of a Lesser God, LA Law, Life Goes On,
Rainman, My Left Foot, and Born on the Fourth of July). The second part asked about personal contact with people with specific disabilities, the third about perceptions of discrimination, the fourth about emotional reactions to disabled, and the fifth about comfort with people with disabilities. The results, after controlling for gender, SES and age, support the importance of efforts to ensure that people with disabilities are accurately portrayed in the media. Exposure to positive portrayals on television and especially in the movies (most likely due to the level of acting in movies) was related in specific instances to more positive perceptions and feelings toward those with disabilities. Yet, personal contact with those with disabilities was associated with greater discomfort with people with various types of disabilities, suggesting that an increase in the positive portrayals of those with disabilities in the media could help the public to acquire a greater understanding, sensitivity, and comfort with the mentally ill in everyday life (Farnall and Smith, 1999).

Not only do the media skew the public’s conception of mental illness, it also affects those who suffer from mental illnesses. Studies suggest that prejudice and fear of stigma arising from these stereotypes and media portrayals are among the principal factors of why people suffering from a mental illness do not seek help (Jorm, 2000; Lipczynska, 2005; Philo & Secker, 1999).

There still continues to be research done to try and prove a causal relationship between the media portrayal of mental illness and the stereotypes that seem to be held by the general public about people suffering with mental illness, but as for now the only thing that can be proven is that there is a relationship. On the other hand, it is quite obvious that the media tends to negatively portray those who are mentally ill, by giving them distinguished, usually unattractive, features, framing them in uninviting fashions and providing false information about certain mental illnesses and characteristics of the mentally ill.
References


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