Beautiful Minds or Dangerous Madmen?: How Portrayals of Mental Illness Affect

Perceptions

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Abstract

Film, television, and other sources of media often serve as a spotlight on the world, highlighting both the good and bad sides of human nature. One concept that is often explored in films and television is mental illness. While some media portrayals show mental illness in a sympathetic light, other portrayals show those with mental disorders as violent and criminal (Diefenbach, 1997; Kondo, 2008), as well as frightening and dangerous (Wahl & Roth, 1982). These negative media portrayals of mental illness could potentially lead to less tolerance for the mentally ill (Granello, Pauley, & Carmichael, 1999) and encourage negative reactions toward those with mental disorders (Stuart, 2006). These negative perceptions of those with mental illness could potentially impact their self-esteem, make them less likely to seek treatment, and make them less likely to continue their medication (Stuart, 2006). However, there are ways to combat the negative effects of distorted portrayals of mental illness in the media including using the media to show realistic depictions of mental illness (Penn, Chamberlin, & Mueser, 2003), discussing portrayals of mental illness in film (Petkari, 2017), and interacting with real people who have mental disorders and taking informational classes (Granello, Pauley, & Carmichael, 1999). While these findings do not provide a perfect solution to counteract negative media portrayals of mental illness, they show how accurate knowledge about mental disorders can increase tolerance and reduce the stigma.

Keywords: mental illness portrayals, film, television, media, perceptions, stigma

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As the movie theater darkens, the audience sits enthralled as they are introduced to the

mind of a mathematical genius. After finding success in academia, this genius is invited to the

Pentagon and is offered a job by a supervisor of the United States Department of Defense to

decipher codes in order to determine where the Soviets have hidden a bomb. The genius searches

for the codes in magazines and newspapers and delivers his findings in a secret mailbox. He

becomes obsessed with his work and fears that he is being tailed by Soviet agents. The filmgoers

move toward the edges of their seats in suspense as they anticipate the action and mystery of the

spy thriller that is continuing to unfold. However, this spy thriller soon takes a turn, revealing

that the genius, John Forbes Nash Jr., has paranoid schizophrenia and that his beliefs in his job

deciphering codes and being tailed by Soviet agents were all a part of his imagination.

The previous description is of some of the events in the 2001 film *A Beautiful Mind,*

which stars Russell Crowe as John Forbes Nash Jr., a famous mathematician who was diagnosed

with paranoid schizophrenia. The film shows the discovery of his disorder and how he and his

family deal with it. While the film itself received acclaim (it was nominated for four Academy

Awards, including one for Best Picture of the Year), its portrayal of Nash's schizophrenia was not

necessarily accurate—showing grand visual hallucinations (Nash's Pentagon employer, Soviet

agents, and even his own "college roommate,"), while in fact the real Nash had only auditory

hallucinations (Grazer & Howard, 2001).

This is just one of the many examples of how films, television, and other sources of

media can distort portrayals of mental disorders simply for the sake of entertaining their

audiences. While *A Beautiful Mind* itself included other portrayals of Nash's disorder, which

were more sympathetic, portrayals of mental disorders in films, television, and in other media can potentially affect the public's perceptions of psychological disorders, which can in turn affect the likelihood of those with mental illnesses receiving the treatment that they need. In order to gain an idea of how powerful these portrayals of mental disorders in the media can be, it is important to understand the perceptions of mental illness that are perpetuated by the media, how those perceptions can affect the people who actually live with mental disorders, and what can be done to lessen those potentially negative effects.

Research has shown how portrayals of psychological disorders in film, television, and other sources of media can affect people's perceptions of these disorders. A content analysis of primetime television programming on the major broadcast networks ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX, by Diefenbach (1997) showed that the portrayal of people with mental disorders was highly correlated with the portrayal of violent crime. In this study, 127 characters were identified to be mentally ill and 43 of these characters (33.9%) were found to be perpetrators of murder, rape, robbery, and assault. When taking into account crimes such as extortion or kidnapping, that number rose to 56 characters (or 44.1%). This study suggests that portrayals of mental illness in the media are often associated with criminal activity. A study by Wahl and Roth (1982) similarly found that television programs portrayed mentally ill people as frightening, dangerous, confused, aggressive, unpredictable, and lacking a social identity. According to Wahl and Roth, these portrayals may encourage the public to fear and avoid those who are mentally ill because of the view that those with mental illnesses are a dangerous "breed apart."

Kondo (2008) claimed that mental illness is often portrayed in film in many negative and incorrect ways, such as linking mental illness and violence. One example she used is the classic 1960 film *Psycho,* in which Norman Bates, a hotel owner, kills a woman because his mother

(whom he had killed) "lives inside his head" and tells him to do so. Another example Kondo used is the 1978 film *Halloween,* in which Michael Myers, a man who had escaped from a mental hospital, goes on a killing spree. Popular and frequently watched films such as these and other slasher films also perpetuate a connection between mental illness and violence.

These portrayals of mental illness as being associated with violence can have potentially negative effects on people who deal with mental disorders. A study by Granello, Pauley, and Carmichael (1999) found that people who received information about mental illness from electronic media, such as television, movies, and videos, reported responses that suggested less tolerance for those with mental disorders. The findings of this study suggest that information shown about mental illness through the media could potentially lead to less tolerant feelings toward those with mental illness.

Consistent with other findings, Stuart (2006) claimed that dramatic and distorted portrayals of mental illness in entertainment and news media emphasize dangerousness, criminality, and unpredictability. These portrayals of mental illness also model negative reactions to those with mental disorders, including fear, rejection, derision, and ridicule. According to Stuart, these portrayals and models can negatively impact people who live with mental illness by promoting stigma and discrimination. This increased stigma against mental illness can negatively impact the self-esteem, the ability to seek help, the adherence to medication, and the overall recovery of those who deal with mental illnesses.

While distorted or incorrect portrayals of mental illness through films and television can potentially negatively impact those with mental illness, research suggests possible ways to combat the negative effects of distorted portrayals of mental illness in the media. One potential way to mitigate the negative effects of distorted portrayals of mental illness in the media is to

expose the public to forms of media that are more realistic and accurate in showing a certain disorder. A study by Penn, Chamberlin, and Mueser (2003) found that participants who viewed a documentary about schizophrenia had more benign attributions about schizophrenia. They were less likely to blame the individuals with schizophrenia themselves for that disorder. However, viewing the documentary did not change their general attitudes about schizophrenia, such as the perceived dangerousness of the disorder. Nevertheless, these findings partially support the use of realistic portrayals of mental illness to reduce the stigma.

A study by Petkari (2017) also examined using movie-based educational interventions to reduce the stigma against mental illness. Over the course of 10 weeks, the participants viewed several films portraying mental illness, including *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *Awakenings* (1990), *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007), and *Good Will Hunting* (1997) and participated in 1-hour long conversations following each film about the mental illness portrayed, the attitudes of the clinicians in the films, and the social environment of the mentally ill character. The results showed that viewing and discussing these films were related to some attitude changes from the participants, including compassion. However, these results do not show a general attitude change about mental illness. While this study also does not support an overall attitude change from participants, it does show the value in discussing films in order to reduce the stigma against mental illness and possibly increase people's compassion and tolerance for those who are mentally ill.

Research has also shown how the stigma against mental illness can be reduced without using media. Granello, Pauley, and Carmichael (1999) found that those who worked with people who had psychological disorders and those who gained information about mental illness from classes were more tolerant of those with mental illnesses. This research shows the importance of

exposure to real people who live with mental disorders, as well exhibits classes as potential means to reduce the stigma against mental illness that may be further perpetuated by the media.

  Films, television, and other forms of media that portray mental illness can lead people to associate mental illness with criminal activity, violence, and dangerousness. These perceptions can have potentially negative effects for those with mental disorders. These effects include impairing clients' self-esteem and inhibiting them from seeking help or continuing treatment because of a stigma and discrimination that is partially sustained through distorted media portrayals. Potential ways these negative effects can be reduced include exposing people to more realistic portrayals of mental illness in the media (such as documentaries), discussing the portrayals of mental illness seen in fictional forms of media, and encouraging people to interact with real individuals with mental disorders and take classes over psychological disorders. While there seems to be no perfect solution to combat the potentially negative effects of distorted portrayals of mental illness that are seen in films and television, it seems that encouraging accurate knowledge about mental disorders is important to increasing tolerance and reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness.

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