

Media Portrayal of Mental Illness and its Treatments

What Effect Does it Have on People with Mental Illness?

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Abstract

This article reviews dominant media portrayals of mental illness, the mentally ill and mental health interventions, and examines what social, emotional and treatment-related effects these may have. Studies consistently show that both entertainment and news media provide overwhelmingly dramatic and distorted images of mental illness that emphasise dangerousness, criminality and unpredictability. They also model negative reactions to the mentally ill, including fear, rejection, derision and ridicule.

The consequences of negative media images for people who have a mental illness are profound. They impair self-esteem, help-seeking behaviours, medication adherence and overall recovery. Mental health advocates blame the media for promoting stigma and discrimination toward people with a mental illness. However, the media may also be an important ally in challenging public prejudices, initiating public debate, and projecting positive, human interest stories about people who live with mental illness. Media lobbying and press liaison should take on a central role for mental health professionals, not only as a way of speaking out for patients who may not be able to speak out for themselves, but as a means of improving public education and awareness. Also, given the consistency of research findings in this field, it may now be time to shift attention away from further cataloguing of media representations of mental illness to the more challenging prospect of how to use the media to improve the life chances and recovery possibilities for the one in four people living with mental disorders.

1. Background

The media have produced some of the most sensitive, educational and award-winning material on mental illness and the mentally ill. However, they have also been responsible for creating a vast store

of negative imagery with some of the most malignant depictions of madness and horrifying illustrations of psychiatric treatments. The fact that the latter greatly outweighs the former, and is more memorable, is of immense concern to people with

mental health problems, their family members and mental health professionals.

This article reviews key issues relating to fictional and non-fictional media portrayals of mental illness and highlights the social, emotional and treatment-related effects these may have for people with a mental illness. The role of the media as allies in anti-stigma activities will also be discussed in order to promote greater awareness of the importance of advocacy in the field. Articles highlighted in this paper have been selected to illustrate dominant themes, provide interesting examples and draw attention to key issues. No attempt is made to provide a comprehensive listing, synthesis or critical review of all publications in this area. Consequently, detailed recommendations for future research or policy reform are not made.

2. Fictional Portrayals of Mental Illness in the Entertainment Media

Denigrating fictional images of mental illness is both frequent and potent. In the US, one-fifth of prime time programmes depict some aspect of mental illness and 2–3% of the adult characters are portrayed as having mental health problems.^[1,2] One in four mentally ill characters kill someone, and half are portrayed as hurting others, making the mentally ill the group most likely to be involved in violence.^[1] The offence rate of mentally ill characters with speaking parts is 10-fold that of other television characters (30% vs 3%, respectively). Mentally ill characters are also victimised more often than other characters, although this may have declined over time in favour of more violent portrayals.^[1-4] Overall, mentally ill characters are portrayed as significantly more violent than other characters and significantly more violent than real people with a mental illness.^[2] The message that mental illness causes violence has been consistent since the early days of television.^[5]

Television portrayals do little to convince the viewing public that people with a mental illness can recover or become productive members of society. Mentally ill characters are frequently portrayed as disenfranchised with no family connections, no occupation and no social identity.^[6] Even the camera shots used to film mentally ill characters differ from those used to film other characters. Mentally ill characters are usually filmed alone with close-up or extreme shots, reinforcing their isolation and dislocation from the other characters and from the community. In one instance where it was possible to follow a character through an episode of mental illness, the differences in photographic technique disappeared as the character recovered.^[3]

Movies such as *The Snake Pit* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* have also dramatised the oppressive and inhuman effects of psychiatric treatments.^[7] Early images of forced confinement, electroshock and psychosurgery horrified audiences and cast serious and lasting doubts upon the nature of psychiatric treatments and the motivation of psychiatric professionals. Whether for grim or for comic effect, the mental health field has been consistently portrayed as a place where unbalanced and malevolent individuals thrive.^[8]

Stigmatising portrayals of mental illness also find clear expression in children's television. For example, in New Zealand, almost half of all programmes aimed at children <10 years of age contain one or more references to mental illness.^[9] Mentally ill characters are portrayed as objects of amusement, derision and fear; and a host of disparaging terms link mental illness to a loss of control. The generic nature of mental illness portrayed in children's television – lacking specific symptoms or diagnoses – invites negative generalisations to all mentally ill people.^[9] Similar negative and stereotypical images are found in Disney animated films.^[10] The majority (85%) contain verbal references to mental illness and 21% of all principal characters are referred to as

mentally ill – a higher prevalence of mental illness than in children’s television programmes. Similar to their television counterparts, mentally ill film characters are the objects of fear, derision or amusement; and verbal references to mental illness are used to denigrate, segregate, alienate and denote another character’s inferior status.

3. Mental Illness in the News

The journalist’s job is not to tell the news, but to *sell* the news. A good story catches public attention either by focusing on conflict and controversy or by raising issues of public safety – all perspectives that may place journalists in direct conflict with mental health advocates.^[11] News media, particularly newspapers, are among the most frequently identified sources of mental health information. This gives them great scope to dispel inaccurate and stigmatising stereotypes perpetuated in the entertainment media or to reinforce and amplify them. Consequently, there has been substantial interest in identifying recurrent themes used by news media to represent ‘real-life’ mental illness and the mentally ill. Results show that news representations of mental illness echo those found in the entertainment media and are largely inaccurate and negative.^[5,12-15] Reporters emphasise the violent, delusional and irrational behaviour of people with a mental illness, and often sensationalise headlines or story content in order to attract attention.^[16-19]

Not every news account is sensationalised, inaccurate or negative.^[20,21] However, balanced news portrayals of violent incidents involving people with a mental illness may be more vivid, anxiety-provoking and memorable. Consequently, they may contribute to stigma and discrimination by providing ‘factual evidence’ that reinforces fictional depictions. The real-time translation of incidents into visual images by news cameras that ‘don’t lie’ provides overwhelming authentication for cultural stereotypes. The global reach of the nightly news en-

ures that a steady diet of these real-life incidents will be available to the viewing audience. A single dramatic event (or a cluster of events) has the power to overshadow positive news stories and anchor deep-seated cultural fears.^[22,23]

News items also reinforce cultural stereotypes by using them to provide the context for ‘factual materials’ presented. Stories are written in such a way that they require the reader to employ negative cultural stereotypes and common sense understandings of what it means to be mentally ill, to interpret story material and co-create the message.^[17,24,25] Narrative ‘frames’ containing a standard set of propositions (or script) are routinely used to transform neutral or sketchy information into easily recognisable stereotypes.^[18,24,26] Audiences recognise the frames and fill in the gaps. In this way, deliberately sketchy or generic depictions implicitly link mental illness to violence by encouraging audiences to draw on pre-existing stereotypes to this effect.^[17,18,25,27] While it is difficult to frame any group as irredeemably evil over a sustained period,^[25] negative news depictions of mental illness have changed little over the years.^[12]

As well as drawing upon existing negative stereotypes, bias is introduced into stories whenever perspectives are limited. The type and extent of information provided can contribute to negative cultural stereotypes by limiting the views presented and the solutions proposed.^[26] Journalists use multiple sources and different views to create story balance. With respect to mental health stories, two important and qualitatively distinct perspectives have been absent from journalistic accounts. Firstly, people with mental illnesses and their personal stories of recovery are rarely included as sources for news items.^[15,28] In a national prospective study of New Zealand news items dealing with mental health or mental illness, Nairn and Coverdale^[29] could identify only five stories out of 600 (0.8%) that offered readers perspectives from people who had been di-

agnosed with a mental disorder. Secondly, mental health professionals have scorned and avoided media contact.^[30] Consequently, their perspectives have been seriously under-represented. Less than 15% of newspaper articles dealing with mental illness include quotes or perspectives from psychiatric experts.^[31]

4. Consequences of Negative Depictions

Media socialisation begins at an early age, even before children have the capacity to distinguish fact from fiction.^[32] Television viewing occupies more of a child's time than any other structured activity, including school. By the time American children begin school, they will already have spent the equivalent of 3 school years watching television.^[33] Thus, by the time they reach adulthood, they will have 'witnessed' untold numbers of media murders committed by someone with a mental illness. In this way, each new generation of viewers will learn how to think about the mentally ill, how to use negative and derisive terminology, and how to respond emotionally. They will also gain a clear idea of how others would treat them were they to become mentally ill.^[33]

Studies show that heavy exposure to media images of mental illness not only cultivates misinformation about crime and misconceptions about those who commit crimes, but also engenders intolerance toward people with mental illnesses and negatively influences the way in which the public evaluates mental health issues.^[26,34-37] The news of a killing by someone with a mental disorder is multiplied by the number of times it is reported over television, radio and cyberspace, giving the mistaken impression that violence among the mentally ill is a frequent and recurring event. Public fear and rejection of the mentally ill increases, and stereotypes are consolidated each time a violent act is reported.^[34] The presumption of dangerousness can be used by a

fearful public to justify forced legal action, coercive treatment, bullying and other forms of victimisation.^[38,39] The exclusive focus on dysfunctional behaviour in the absence of personal recovery stories also promotes pessimistic and sceptical views of psychiatric treatment, and contributes to a lack of mental health resources and policy initiatives.^[6] Because negative media images generate intense emotional responses, they can exert exceptional power over audiences and are even capable of overriding positive personal experiences,^[40] corrective information^[41] and positive news.^[20] For example, despite much research evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of psychiatric interventions and treatments, the treatments are often viewed with profound suspicion by funders and decision makers, with the result that they are difficult to access and are monitored with more than the usual zeal.^[42] Similarly, even though empirical studies show that the majority of people with a mental illness never commit a violent act or that they are more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of violence, the public significantly over-estimates the frequency of violence committed by people with mental disorders and greatly exaggerates their own personal risk.^[43] Indeed, they feel more reassured to learn that someone was stabbed to death in a robbery, than stabbed to death by a psychotic man.^[44]

People with mental disorders and their families are acutely aware of negative images of mental illness in the entertainment and news media.^[16,45] Most directly blame the media, citing images linking mental illness to violence as a central source of stigma.^[46] Negative media images are profoundly distressing to people who have a mental illness and their family members, and often have direct social repercussions. In the US, the majority of family advocates responding to surveys report having encountered media depictions of the mentally ill that left them feeling angry, hurt, sad and discouraged. Media emphasis on extreme and violent cases, inac-

curate portrayals, and derogatory and disrespectful use of language were particularly troubling.^[47] In the UK, three-quarters of mental health service users polled reported that media coverage of mental health was unfair, negative and unbalanced, and half indicated that the media coverage had had a negative effect on their own mental health.^[48] One-third said their family and friends had acted differently toward them because of the negative media coverage. One-third said that media coverage had put them off applying for jobs or volunteering, and one-quarter said they experienced hostility from neighbours and local communities because of these reports.^[48] The expectation that one will be stigmatised because of a mental illness produces social dysfunction and disability.^[49] People with mental disorders are afraid to disclose this fact to others. They fear being found out, suffer low self-esteem and limit their social contacts in an effort to avoid stigma and discrimination.^[47] In this way, media portrayals of mental illness can directly affect people with mental illnesses by impeding their social participation and interfering with their recovery.

Mental health professionals are also acutely aware of the effects of negative media images on patient outcomes. They see popular depictions of mental health professionals as unethical, exploitative or mentally deranged, and psychiatric treatments as oppressive and controlling, promoting widespread distrust of mental health providers and avoidance of psychiatric treatments.^[31] They blame negative media imagery for treatment-related problems, such as a denial of symptoms, failure to seek treatment, failure to accept treatment and poor adherence with treatment regimens.^[50] For example, in a recent study of people receiving outpatient treatment for depression, medication adherence was predicted by the perceived severity of the illness and the level of perceived stigma, even when other related factors such as medication adverse effects or the

distress associated with these adverse effects were controlled.^[51]

5. Summary and Discussion

Long before people ever meet someone with a mental illness or encounter a mental health professional, they have formed opinions and developed prejudices. The media create and perpetuate mental health stigma and discrimination through repeated use of negative and inaccurate images of the mentally ill, mental health professionals and mental health treatments.^[37] Regardless of the genre studied, the media have been found to provide overwhelmingly dramatic and distorted images of mental illness that emphasise dangerousness, criminality and unpredictability. The media also model reactions to the mentally ill, including fear, rejection, derision and ridicule. Through programmes aimed at children, the entertainment media act as a powerful socialising agent, communicating dominant cultural stereotypes and giving vivid examples of the language and behaviours that are to be used in adult life. The images found in the entertainment and news media interact to create, reinforce and amplify stigmatising images of mental illness. Factual and fictional images are mutually reinforcing. News coverage of adverse events involving people with a mental illness anchors cultural stereotypes in day-to-day events and provides real-life and close-to-home examples of how mental illness *is* linked to violence or criminality. In fact, in this context, balanced reporting of violent incidents may provide the strongest 'evidence' to support negative cultural stereotypes.^[20]

Media images have profound implications for people who have a mental illness, not only in terms of their own self-image, help-seeking behaviours and recovery, but also both for the level of fear and hostility they experience when they interact with members of the general public and encounter community intolerance, and for the lack of supportive

policies and programmes.^[52] The media are blamed for creating and perpetuating stigma and discrimination toward people with a mental illness which, in turn, limits help-seeking behaviour, medication adherence and illness recovery.

Given the universally negative view of the media by people with mental health problems, their families and mental health professionals, it is also important to recognise that the media may also be enlisted as a formidable ally in helping to challenge public prejudices, initiate public debate and project positive, human interest stories about people who live with mental illness.^[20,30,45] Media professionals may also be eager and responsive targets for anti-stigma efforts and proactive lobbying, particularly if this improves communication between reporters and psychiatric experts (which includes both people who have a mental illness and mental health providers), and facilitates access to better information.^[13,53] For example, despite negative news portrayals, reporters are generally accepting in their attitudes toward mental illness.^[54,55] At least they have been found to be no more authoritarian, distant or restrictive than other groups, and they do not consider that the mentally ill are more dangerous than the general population. This has led to speculation that media coverage may be negative as a result of broader industry pressures that foster particular angles or story lines, such as the need to sensationalise stories in order to gain a competitive edge, a lack of time to do otherwise, lack of access to mental health experts to present opposing views and other industry constraints (including gate-keeper effects from editors as they determine which stories will be published and what slant they will take).^[54,55] In an effort to promote respectful depictions of mental illness, SANE Australia (a charitable advocacy group) regularly approaches the creators of stigmatising images to help them understand the potential harm of those stigmatising images. The majority of individuals approached are apologetic and happy to change.

Only in a small number of cases is more active lobbying required.^[56] In addition, the advent of movies such as *A Beautiful Mind* provide important opportunities for mental health experts to use media images as a platform for public discussions designed to promote greater understanding of mental illness and greater compassion for the mentally ill.^[57]

If appropriately enlisted, the media may challenge stigma and promulgate mental health messages.^[20,58] However, integrating mass media outreach and public education into clinical psychiatric practice remains largely unexploited. Kutner and Beresin^[59] recommend that mass media training be integrated into clinical residency and continuing professional education to help mental health professionals develop the skills required to work effectively with the media and get their messages across in more proactive ways. Skills programmes to help people who have a mental illness act as community spokespeople may also help to redress the imbalance in media reporting and put a more sympathetic and human face on the issues. Speakers Bureau programmes involving people with a mental illness have been effectively used worldwide to improve the knowledge and attitudes of high school students toward people with serious and persistent mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia.^[60] In recognition that “psychiatrists suffer from stigma too”, Persaud^[61] suggests that media lobbying and press liaison should take on a central role for the profession, not only as a way of speaking out for patients who may not be able to speak out for themselves, but also as a means of improving public education and awareness about what psychiatrists do and the availability of effective treatments, and as a way of taking a more proactive role in helping the public recognise and manage mental disorders. Similarly, Cutcliffe and Hannigan^[13] advocate for greater proactive lobbying on the part of psychiatric nurses to stimulate constructive debate, positive story lines and information exchange.

As few areas of research have yielded such consistent results – over time, across study methods, across countries and even across different media – it may now be time to shift attention away from any further cataloguing of media representations of mental illness to the more challenging prospect of how to use the media to improve the life chances and recovery possibilities for the one in four people who live with a mental disorder.

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