

# Portrayal of Mental Illness: Misrepresentations in Cinema

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**Introduction:** Since the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the silver screen has featured many images related to mental illness. Hollywood has been fascinated with topics related to psychiatric conditions. Research has shown that media is the main source of public information about mental illness (Coverdale et. al, 2002). For better or worse, the media, including films, shapes our ideas and ways in which we understand those around us. Inaccurate information in the media, even if it is positive, results in misunderstandings. For example, inaccurate depictions of schizophrenia which is often confused in the cinema with multiple personality disorder can lead to false beliefs, confusion, conflict and a delay in receiving treatment.

Wrong portrayal of mental illness and psychotherapy has far-reaching results. Inaccurate depictions fuel stigma and may prevent people from seeking help.

“There are people out there who could benefit from therapy but don’t go because they think it’s just for ‘crazy’ people or think all therapists are nuts — because that’s what they see in the media,” said Ryan Howes, Ph.D, a psychologist, writer and professor in Pasadena, California.

When a tragic or violent act happens, the news media tends to exaggerate mental illness and depict it negatively, according to Jeffrey Sumber, MA, a Chicago psychotherapist, author and teacher.

All forms of media i.e. films, internet, TV, print media have covered mental illness topics extensively. One is presently running on Star World “The Monk” where Mr. Monk, the investigator, is suffering with OCD. Another popular TV serial was “Homeland” where special agent Carrie was shown to have bipolar disorder.

“One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest” produced in Hollywood was the first movie which generated lot of public interest and also anxiety because it questioned the issue of same treatment modality irrespective of the diagnoses. Jack Nicholson won an Oscar for his portrayal of mentally ill.

As far as portrayal of illness is concerned it has been over dramatic and mostly negative in nature. People with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, multiple personality disorder etc have been shown as unpredictable, untrustworthy, violent and criminal in nature.

In the present paper some of these issues are highlighted by reviewing the literature and doing content analyses of 20- contemporary movies.

**Review of literature:** Many studies have explored the on screen portrayal of people with mental illness. Overwhelmingly, studies in this area have shown that such portrayal is negative in nature and it perpetuates myths and stereotypes about mental illness. Various ‘framing’ techniques are used to indicate that characters with mental illness are different than other characters. Filmic devices such as the individual point of view, close-up shots, discordant music, atmospheric lighting and setting selection are frequently employed (Sieff, 2003; Hyler, 1991; Wilson et al, 1999; Rose, 1998; McDonald, 2001).

Terms such as “crazy”, “mad”, “losing your mind”, “psycho”, “deranged”, “wacko”, “loony” is often used by other characters in reference to the character in question(Wilson,2000; Goldstein, 1979).

Negative portrayals and misrepresentations have been classified by Hyler et al (1991). One misrepresentation is homicidal maniac who, in movies, is responsible for murder, rape, robbery and assault. This rate is much higher than occurs in real life (Condren, 2000; Wilson, 1999; Diefenback, 1995, Rose, 1998; Wahl, 1982; McDonald, 2001; Fruth, 1989). Classic film examples of this stereotyping are The Maniac Cook (1909), Psycho (1960) and The Exorcist (1973).

According to literature, fictional portrayals of mental illness in film are also often presented in a manner that fosters misconceptions about specific disorders. Key examples are dissociative identity disorder, gender identity disorder and anterograde amnesia, featured in films like *The three faces of eve* (1957), *Psycho* (1960) and *Memento* (2000), respectively ( Fearing, 1946; Greenberg, 2003; Diefenbach, 1995; Diefenbach, 1997).

While the media easily pins the blame for violent acts on mental illness, a closer look often reveals that many confounding factors such as social class or substance abuse are likely to form the connection to violence, Ketteringham (2011) maintained. He added that many studies connecting violence and mental illness have suffered from selection bias because they draw from populations of jail inmates or from psychiatric patients. However, the latter is only a subset of the mentally ill population and not representative of people with mental illness as a whole.

### **Present Study:**

#### Objectives:

1. To study portrayal of mental illness in cinema.
2. To study whether portrayal is correct, exaggerated and /or negative in nature.

**Hypothesis 1:** People with mental illness are wrongly portrayed in cinema as violent & dangerous.

**Hypothesis – 2:** Cinema encourages gender stereotyping in depicting mentally ill

**Method:** Content analysis of 20-contemporary Hollywood films with at least one main character suffering with mental illness was done. Review of literature on mental illness portrayed in films was compared with actual data.

**List of 20-movies:** Sucker Punch, Memento, Aviator, Silver Linings Playbook, Secret Window, Shutter Island, Girl, Interrupted, A Beautiful Mind, Psycho, Silence of the Lambs, The Cell, Matchstick Men, American Psycho, Black Swan, Donnie Darko, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Requiem for a Dream, Prozac Nation, 88 Minutes and We Need to Talk About Kevin.

## **Results:**

### **Hypothesis-1: Mental illness and violence in movies**

After content analyzing twenty films it was found that

- Ø 65% movies showed violent behavior toward others
- Ø 40% inflicted some form of self-harm
- Ø 20% movies showing homicidal behavior
- Ø 20% committed suicide during the story

Patricia Owen (Psychiatric Services, July) of the psychology department at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, reviewed 41 English-language films released between 1990 and 2010 that featured at least one main character with mental illness.

Owen found that 83 percent of those characters were portrayed as dangerous or violent to others or themselves. Almost one-third engaged in homicidal behaviour, and one-quarter committed suicide.

Some very violent movies that I analysed were The Manic Cook (1909), Psycho (1960), Silence of the Lambs (1991) and Secret Window (2004).

According to Centre for Mental Health and Media at Massachusetts General Hospital Department of Psychiatry “mentally ill people are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence.”

Research found that mental illness alone doesn't predict violent behaviour (Elbogen & Johnson, 2009). Other variables—including substance abuse, demographic variables (e.g., sex, age) and the presence of stressors (e.g., unemployment)—also play a role.

Substance use disorders have increased the risk of a violent incident. Holcomb (2002) found that patients with alcohol or drug use had more arrests over their lifetime than patients with schizophrenia, personality disorders, or affective disorders.

### **Hypothesis-2: Gender stereotyping**

Out of 20-movies 16 movies i.e. 80% had males as main characters suffering with mental illness. In another study conducted in Texas it was found that out of 40 reviewed movies 79% were males playing the lead role of mentally ill and 95% were whites.

Actual research findings for women being more mentally ill than men are many. The Guardian (James Ball, a clinical psychologist at Oxford University, 2005) found that women are 40% more likely than men to develop mental illness.

### **Conclusion:**

In the present study it was found that most of the movies (65%) showed that mentally ill were violent people. According to the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, the risk of violence is small among people with schizophrenia. “Studies have found that dangerousness/crime is the most common theme of stories on mental illness,” said Cheryl K. Olson, Sc.D., co-director of the Centre for Mental Health and Media at Massachusetts General Hospital Department of Psychiatry.

But research suggests that mentally ill people are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence. Also, recent research found that mental illness alone doesn't predict violent behavior (Elbogen & Johnson, 2009). Other variables—including substance abuse, history of violence, demographic variables (e.g., sex, age) and the presence of stressors (e.g., unemployment)—also play a role.

Therefore it can be concluded that individuals with mental illness, when appropriately treated, do not pose any increased risk of violence

over the general population. Violence may be more of an issue in patients diagnosed with personality disorders and substance dependence. The overall impact of mental illness as a factor in the violence that occurs in society as a whole appears to be overemphasized, possibly intensifying the stigma already surrounding psychiatric disorders. Violence and mental illness are not without connection, however, as they share many biologic and psychosocial aspects. (Marie E. Rueve, and Randon S. Welton, 2008)

As for second hypothesis, in the present study it was found that 80% movies had male characters suffering with mental illness. According to WHO there are no consistent gender differences in prevalence rates for severe mental disorders such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. For depression and anxiety there are large gender differences. Women are likely to suffer more with such disorders than men.

### **Gender and Depression**

Unipolar or major depression occurs approximately twice as often in women. Depression and anxiety are the most common comorbid disorders and a significant gender difference exists in the rate of comorbidity (Linzer et al., 1996).

Depression is more common in women than men. 1 in 4 women will require treatment for depression at some time, compared to 1 in 10 men. The reasons for this are unclear, but are thought to be due to both social and biological factors. (National Institute for Clinical Excellence, 2003)

According to Freeman's study, women are approximately 75% more likely than men to report having recently suffered from depression, and around 60% more likely to report an anxiety disorder.

Women also have significantly higher rates of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than men (Kessler et al, 1995).

General population surveys have reported that around 1 in every 12 adults experiences PTSD at some time in their lives and women's risk of developing PTSD following exposure to trauma is approximately twofold higher than men's (Breslau et al, 1998), and thus paralleling the difference found in rates of depression.

Women are twice as likely to experience anxiety as men. Of people with phobias or OCD, about 60% are female. (The Office for National Statistics Psychiatric Morbidity report, 2001)

Men are more likely than women to have an alcohol or drug problem and also ADHD (The Office for National Statistics Psychiatric Morbidity report, 2001) Women are more likely to have been treated for a mental health problem than men (29% compared to 17%). This could be because, when asked, women are more likely to report symptoms of common mental health problems. (Better Or Worse: A Longitudinal Study Of The Mental Health Of Adults In Great Britain, National Statistics, 2003).

Hence, it can be concluded that there is misrepresentation in cinema as far as gender stereotyping is concerned.

### **Some Observations:**

#### **Depiction of Psychotherapists:**

Gabbard (2001) concluded that psychiatrists are ridiculed, demonized and mocked. Other professions are negatively stereotyped in the movies such as corrupt politician, chubby donut loving cop, dishonest lawyer, but the psychology profession suffers the most from on-screen portrayals. The first movie psychiatrist appeared in 1906 in a film called *Dr. Dippy's Sanitarium*. Where psychotherapist is shown as bearded, incompetent, and often clownish who sometimes acted "crazier" than his patients.

They are also shown as neurotic, rigid, comically inept, uncaring, self-absorbed, foolish and idiotic.

### **Treatment methods (ECT):**

In one study by McDonald & Walter (2009) after reviewing 22 Hollywood films found that on-screen ECT has very little in common with the actual procedure. Recent movies have turned ECT into an institutional device to control or punish patients who do not follow norms. Many viewers, who gain knowledge from films, responded that ECT is torture and cruel method to control patients. One flew over the cuckoo's nest featured a scene which became famous for its depiction of ECT. In reality ECT is given under mild sedation along with a muscle relaxant.

### **Causes of mental illness:**

Other movie myths concerning mental illness involve the cause of mental disorders. Firstly, films depict mental illness as the result of earlier traumatic experiences, or the product of a dysfunctional relationship with a cold and aloof parent (Wedding & Niemec, 2003), whereas, it has been established that heredity plays a big role in causation of mental illness.

In the end it can be concluded that misrepresentations of mentally ill as violent, incompetent and bizarre stigmatize mental illness and discourage help seeking and treatment compliance.

In entertainment media's defence it can be said that their primary job is to entertain and not to educate but society will benefit a lot if they portray mental disorder more responsibly.

### **Limitations of the study:**

1. Twenty movies are not enough, more movies should be analyzed.
2. Only Hollywood movies were reviewed.

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Article first published online: 27 JAN 2003 DOI: 10.1002/jclp.10142