Mass Media Images of Mental Illness: A Review of the Literature

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Studies that address the frequency, accuracy, and impact of mass media portrayals of mental illness are reviewed. Numerous studies of frequency and content of media depictions support clinical observations that mental illness is frequently depicted in the mass media, particularly the entertainment media, and that these depictions tend to be inaccurate and unfavorable. Limitations, such as age of the studies and mixed attention to psychiatry, psychology, and mental illness, however, leave a need for further such studies. Investigations of the specific impact of media images of mental illness support the belief that media presentations about mental illness, including those in entertainment form, can have significant effects on attitudes toward mental illness and treatment. These studies, however, are few in number and have demonstrated only short-term effects of specific portrayals. Further research is needed to demonstrate longlasting effects and the overall impact of multiple, repeated, media depictions.

The substantial attention that has been focused recently on the image of mental illness in the media has led to the conclusion that mental health attitudes are significantly influenced by mass media sources (e.g., U.S. President’s Commission on Mental Health, 1978). Such observations are supported by a recent national survey on mental health attitudes in which mass media presentations were the most commonly reported sources of information about mental illness (Daniel Yanklovich Group, Inc., 1990). Moreover, mental health advocates have asserted that the information provided by the mass media tends to be unfavorable and inaccurate and that mass media depictions of mental illness play a significant role in perpetuating harmful misconceptions (e.g., Backer, 1985, 1989; Bryant, 1989; Drickey, 1990; Gerber, 1980, 1985; Linter, 1979; Steadman & Cocozzo, 1977–78; Wahl, 1980). Those more directly affected by mental illness stigma—patients and their families—share this view. Members of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, in a recent survey about their experiences with stigma, consistently cited media sources (films and news stories about mentally ill killers, in particular) as primary contributors to mental illness stigma (Wahl & Harman, 1989).

Many of the current assertions about the mass media’s portrayal of mental illness and its role in maintaining stigma are based on impressions and anecdotal observations, with only occasional reference to specific research findings. The lack of inclusion of research is not altogether surprising given that, to date, there has been no comprehensive review of the research literature on media images of mental illness to which people could refer. In view of the increasing interest in, and suggested influence of, mass media images of mental illness, an articulation and examination of the literature pertaining to these images and their impact would seem important and timely. This paper provides such an examination.

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In particular, this paper will look at four basic questions related to concerns that the mass media may be contributing substantially to the continued stigma of mental illness through their unfavorable portrayals of mentally ill people and to the call for concentrated efforts to change current mass media depictions. Those questions are: (1) Are media images of mental illness common enough to warrant the kind of attention mental health advocates are urging? (2) Are the media images of mental illness that do occur as inaccurate and unfavorable as is believed? (3) Do media images of mental illness have the harmful effects that mental health advocates fear? (4) What further research may be necessary to increase our understanding of media images and their impact?

Frequency of Depictions of Mental Illness

Evidence from numerous studies involving a variety of different media suggests that mental illness is indeed a common topic. Popular magazines, for example, convey much mental health information, according to several studies. Taylor (1957) found 49 items related to mental health in 91 different magazines displayed on newsstands at the time of the study. Gerbner’s (1961) examination of The Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature found a dramatic increase, between 1900 and 1959, in both the number of topic headings related to psychiatry and in total number of magazine articles listed under those headings. By 1959, there were 43 different headings listed in The Readers’ Guide (compared to 6 in 1900) and about three times as many total articles in the last three (multiyear) volumes than in the first three. Byrd (1979b), focusing on 10 high circulation magazines, found mental illness to be the second most common disability discussed in magazine articles in 1977 (behind alcohol and drug abuse). Wahl and Kaye (1992), using methodology similar to that of Gerbner (1961), found that the number of mental health articles indexed in 1988 (391) was approximately three times the number of articles in 1965 (128) and almost twice the 1970 number (213). Moreover, the growth in mental health articles exceeded that of articles in general, with articles on specific mental disorders showing the greatest increases.

Entertainment media, such as movies, also appear to be rich in mental health content. Charles Winick (1978), using film descriptions published by the American Film Institute, identified 152 films appearing between 1919 and 1978 that involved psychiatric themes. Examining descriptions of feature films reviewed in the Monthly Film Bulletin between May, 1976, and September, 1983, Byrd and Pipes (1981) and Byrd and Elliott (1985) found 67 films, an average of 7–8 each year (6% of the total films reviewed), with mental illness portrayals, making psychiatric disorder the most commonly depicted disability in films during that time span.

By far the most studied medium is television, and it appears to be a primary and continuing contributor of mental health information. Taylor’s (1957) examination of over 100 hours of television programming from a single network showed that items related to mental illness were a daily occurrence, with 2.3 programs per day containing information about mental health. Reviewing a television network’s “film clearance file,” Gerbner (1959, 1961) and Gerbner and Tannenbaum (1960) found that nearly one in every 10 films on television between 1950 and 1958 contained “significant psychological story elements.” Keith Byrd and his colleagues (Byrd, 1979a; Byrd, Byrd, & Allen, 1977; Byrd, McDaniel, & Rhoden, 1980), using TV Guide descriptions, found mental illness to be the most commonly portrayed disability on prime time television in 1967, 1976, and 1978. Similarly, Cassata, Skill, and Boadu (1979) reported that psychiatric disorders were “the number one specific health-related problem in the soap opera world” in 1977,
with 25 instances of various "mental problems," including schizophrenia, manic depression, amnesia, and hysterical blindness. Wahl and Roth (1982), using trained raters to view prime time television on five different channels, found that about 9% of the 385 prime time shows during a 1-month period involved a character labeled as mentally ill. This is very similar to the findings from Gerbner's Cultural Indicators Project published around the same time. In 1980, Gerbner reported that about 10% of all prime time shows over an 11-year period involved some theme or depiction of mental illness and that about 2% of the major characters in prime time television were mentally ill. Subsequent reports from Gerbner's project suggest, furthermore, that television depiction of mental illness is increasing. By 1985 Gerbner was reporting that 17% of programs involved mental illness; and, in 1989, Signorelli, summarizing the data from 17 annual week-long samples of prime time network programs broadcast between 1969 and 1985, found the figure increased to 20.5%, with 3% of the major characters during that time being mentally ill.

Thus, these studies indicate that depictions of mental illness are neither rare in the mass media nor confined to any one medium. Findings suggest that there are literally hundreds of mental health articles each year in popular magazines, depictions of mental illness in as many as 6% of theatrical films each year, and portrayals of mentally ill characters in 10–20% of all television shows. Finally, results indicate that public exposure to mental health information through mass media such as magazines, films, and television is, if anything, increasing. In terms of the first question posed for this review, it appears that media images of mental illness are indeed common enough to warrant careful attention.

Accuracy of Depiction of Mental Illness

Studies of the content of media depictions of mental illness have fairly consistently revealed inaccurate images. Nunnally's (1957, 1961) early studies, for example, compared media depictions with the opinion of mental health experts and concluded that "in general, the causes, symptoms, methods of treatment, prognosis, and social effects portrayed by the media are far removed from what the experts advocate" (1957, p. 229). Byrd (1979a) reported similarly that emotional disabilities were among the least accurately portrayed on television of all disabilities rated.

More specifically, these and other studies have identified a media bias toward presentation of severe, psychotic disorders. Nunnally (1961) found that media portrayals emphasized the bizarre symptoms of mental illness. Byrd et al. (1980) noted a similar disproportionate depiction of psychotic forms of mental illness, as opposed to milder mental health problems, in television programs. Day and Page (1986) compared ratings of selected articles from Canadian newspapers between January, 1977, and June, 1984, with actual Canadian mental health statistics and found schizophrenia greatly over-represented in newspaper reports, being implicated in 77% of the newspaper descriptions.

Data indicate also that mentally ill persons are depicted unfavorably in the mass media. In particular, they tend to be depicted as inadequate, unlikable, and dangerous. Wahl and Roth (1982) found that mentally ill characters in prime time television programs tended to lack social identity; they were typically single (43%) or of unknown marital status (31%) and frequently without identifiable employment (49%). The adjectives found most frequently applicable to the mentally ill characters were unfavorable ones such as "confused," "aggressive," "dangerous," and "unpredictable"; positive adjectives such as "poised," "loyal," "friendly," and "honest," were found to be far less frequently applicable. Signorelli's (1989) summary of multiyear television ratings gave
similar results. She found that prime time mentally ill characters were less likely than other characters to have identifiable occupations and that even those who were employed were more likely to be depicted as failures than were other characters. In addition, Signorelli reported that mentally ill characters were most likely to be “bad” and least likely to be “good” characters. Day and Page’s (1986) composite personality description of patients featured in Canadian newspapers included the following highly unflattering descriptors: “... unemployed, hospitalized for schizophrenia ... [and showing] personality characteristics implying dangerousness, unpredictability, dependency, anxiety, unsociability, unhappiness, unproductiveness, and transience” (p. 815).

The depiction of mentally ill persons as violent and dangerous is even more consistent, according to research results. As noted above, Day and Page (1986) found dangerousness and unpredictability to be common traits of the mentally ill persons appearing in newspaper stories, whereas Wahl and Roth (1982) found those same traits, along with confused and aggressive, to apply to mentally ill characters in prime time television. Shain and Phillips (1991) reported that 86% of all UPI stories dealing with former psychiatric patients focused on the commission of a violent crime, and Matas, el-Guebaly, Harper, Green, and Peterkin (1986) found that those types of stories—ones portraying mentally ill persons as dangerous—were more likely than other articles about mental illness to land on the front page. Findings from Gerbner’s laboratory further underscore the strong media connection between violence and mental illness. Signorelli’s summary of 17 years of television ratings indicates that 72.1% of mentally ill characters in prime time dramas were portrayed as violent (vs. 41.6% of all adult major characters); over one fifth (21.6%) of the mentally ill characters killed someone. Even females, much less likely overall to be violent than male characters (only 27.2% were portrayed as violent), showed high levels of violence when characterized as mentally ill (60% were violent and 16.7% killed). Moreover, the periodic reports of Gerbner’s ongoing data collection suggest that the rates of violence among mentally ill characters have changed little over the years. For example, the 70% of mentally ill characters reported as violent by Gerbner in 1980 is virtually the same as the 72% Signorelli reported over 10 years later.

Overall, then, research findings support the impressions of mental health advocates that media portrayals of mental illness are inaccurate and unfavorable. Bizarre symptoms and more serious psychotic disorders are emphasized. Mentally ill persons presented in the mass media are typically social and occupational failures and possess a number of undesirable character traits, including a propensity for violence. The fears of mental health advocates that media portrayals may perpetuate negative perceptions of mental illness thus appear to be well-founded.

Effects of Media Depictions of Mental Illness

Typically, the establishment of prevalent inaccurate and unfavorable stereotypes, as in the previously reviewed studies, is enough for authors to argue that such consistent negative portrayal must have an impact on attitudes and behavior toward those with mental illnesses. This argument, in part, involves extrapolation from other studies which have demonstrated that repeated exposure to media stereotypes in general influences conceptions of social reality. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorelli (1980), for example, have empirically demonstrated that heavy viewers of television (those who view more than 4 hours a day) are more likely to give answers to questions about the nature of the world (e.g., how violent it is) that are congruent with television’s distorted portrayals than are light viewers (those who view less than 2 hours a day). Combined
with the content studies that establish a high frequency of media portrayals of mental illness and substantial inaccuracy within those portrayals, Gerbner's research provides inferential support for the argument that media images of mental illness operate like other prevalent inaccuracies and lead to public acceptance of the stereotypes presented.

Research on media impact that is specifically focused on mental illness portrayals, however, is relatively rare. Several studies have involved television documentaries about mental illness and treatment. Belson (1967) found that a five-part BBC series, "The Hurt Mind," was relatively successful in achieving its goal of educating the public about mental illness and treatment. He reported that viewers of the series, which stressed physical and outpatient treatments of mental illness, were more likely to name physical and outpatient treatments for mental disorder than were nonviewers. He also reported that viewers were more likely to express sympathy for and willingness to associate with mentally ill persons. No information was provided, however, about the statistical significance of any of these differences. Bridge and Medvene (1981) carried out a similar study with respect to an NET showing of "Back Wards to Back Streets," a documentary concerning deinstitutionalization, and found changes in viewer responses consistent with the messages of the documentary. In particular, viewers were reported to show increased approval of group homes on their blocks and increased belief that "participating in community-based treatment services" and "having comfortable, secure housing" are important to successful posthospital adjustment (although no statistical analyses were presented). With respect to unfavorable influence, Husain and Robins (1978) studied the perceived impact of a May 26, 1977, ABC TV production that reportedly discussed physical therapies for mental illness in generally unfavorable terms. Psychiatrists viewing the program agreed that the documentary presented an unfair and negative portrayal of psychiatry, and 21% (32) indicated that it had created problems in the treatment relationship, in particular creating patient concern about the physical therapies they were receiving. Thus, there is some evidence that documentaries may influence viewer attitudes in directions consistent with the content of the program.

Several researchers have tried to examine the influence of entertainment media portrayals on public impressions of mental illness. As noted earlier, one component of Nunnally's study of public and media conceptions of mental illness was ratings, by mental health professionals, of what they thought should be presented in the mass media. Noting that expert opinions tended to be very different from media depictions whereas lay opinion did not differ substantially from that of experts, Nunnally (1957) concluded that "mass media are not mediating between experts and the public" (p. 229). However, Scheff (1963), re-examining the same data, came to the opposite conclusion, arguing that, because public opinion scores fell consistently between those of the media and those of the experts, Nunnally's data showed the pull of media portrayals away from expert (accurate) conceptions, "with the more frequent and visible mass media productions reinforcing the traditional stereotypes" (Scheff, 1963, p. 464). Neither Scheff's nor Nunnally's report included statistical analyses of results; in fact, specific means or difference scores were not provided.

In a more direct test of the effects of an entertainment depiction of mental illness, Domino (1983) focused on the film "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." He administered a questionnaire to college students before and after the release of the film. According to the author, no significant differences were found in measured attitudes prior to the film, but students who saw the movie showed significantly less positive attitudes toward mental illness after the film than those who had not seen the film. Domino also sought
to assess the possible ameliorating effect of a 90-minute television documentary intended to present a more realistic view of life inside a mental hospital. The documentary, juxtaposing scenes from "Cuckoo's Nest" with actual footage shot at the same hospital that was depicted in the movie (Oregon State Hospital), was aired about 8 months after the film's release. Half the respondents in each group were shown the documentary and the study questionnaire was re-administered to all participants at this time. Domino reported that this documentary had no significant impact on attitudinal responses. Those who had seen the original film still showed less positive responses than those who had not seen the film, regardless of whether or not they viewed the documentary.

A similar study was undertaken by Wahl and Lefkowits (1989) using a television film that had been the subject of much concern by mental health advocates. The 1986 made-for-TV movie entitled "Murder: By Reason of Insanity" was a fact-based account of a man who killed his wife while on a day pass from a psychiatric hospital. The murder of the wife was depicted in graphic form, and the strong message of the film was that hospitals should take greater care that dangerous psychiatric patients do not get released into the community. Mental health advocates concerned about the potential stigmatizing effect of the film persuaded the network to add a "trailer" to the film pointing out that such violence is uncharacteristic of mentally ill persons. The trailer was shown on screen and read by a narrator at three different points in the film—at the beginning, after the first commercial, and at the end.

One group of 38 undergraduates viewed the target film with the trailers in place. A second group of 48 saw the film without the trailers, while a third group of 19 students saw a different movie about murder but not mental illness. Following each film, participants completed Taylor and Dear's (1981) Community Attitudes toward the Mentally Ill (CAMI) questionnaire. Those who saw the target film expressed significantly more negative attitudes on the CAMI than did those who saw the control film, regardless of whether or not the trailers were included. In particular, all participants who viewed the target film were more likely to indicate a need for hospitalization for mentally ill persons and to be less accepting of community placement for psychiatric patients. As with Domino's study, it appeared that the dramatic portrayal had strong effects that could not be counteracted by the addition of other nonstigmatizing information.

Studies of media impact, then, tend to support the belief that media images of mental illness can influence public knowledge and attitudes about mental illness. The evidence suggests that people do pick up information from mental health documentaries, that such documentaries may persuade audiences toward their views about mental illness and treatment, and that negative entertainment presentations contribute to negative and rejecting attitudes toward mental illness.

Future Research

Although the above research supports concerns about the high frequency, unfavorable nature, and harmful effects of mass media images of mental illness, a more careful look reveals numerous limitations that prevent definitive generalizations about the current state of media depictions of mental illness. Perhaps the greatest limitation to our understanding of how and how often mental illness is now portrayed in the mass media is that existing studies are clearly dated. Most are 10 or more years old and may not accurately estimate the current prevalence or nature of media depictions of mental illness. Media do change, and it is entirely possible that what appears to have been a popular topic 10 years ago is no longer as common. In addition, the last 10 years have
seen substantial efforts by mental health advocacy groups to respond to and change problematic media images of mental illness. It is possible that these efforts have had an effect and that current images are less stereotypical and stigmatizing than those found in reviewed studies. It is clear that more current studies are needed to ensure that data reflect present circumstances rather than merely historical patterns.

A second major limitation is a lack of consistency from study to study as to what is being examined. Some studies looked very broadly at topics "related" to mental health. Taylor (1957), for example, counted any message that contained a clear reference to mental disorder or to mental health treatment personnel or institutions. Gerbner's (1961) study of Readers' Guide listings included all articles on "psychology, psychiatry, and mental illness"; topic headings used included "Experimental Psychology," "Industrial Psychology," and "Educational Psychology." Wahl and Kaye (1992), on the other hand, confined their examination to articles on mental disorder and its treatment. Winick's (1978) study of movies included film depiction of mental illness or depiction of a psychiatrist or other psychotherapist, whereas Byrd, in his numerous studies, did not describe at all the criteria used to define mental illness. The depiction frequencies reported in these different studies, then, are not directly comparable, and investigators are likely to disagree about the validity of their various figures in establishing the prevalence of mental illness depictions in the media. To make meaningful assessments and comparisons of frequencies of depiction of mental illness across media, time, and studies, greater agreement about what is to be counted and how is clearly needed.

Similarly, the identification of common characteristics of "mentally ill" persons depicted in the media is likely to be influenced by decisions about types of psychiatric disabilities to include. Some studies appeared to include mental retardation and substance abuse under the broad rubric of mental disability; others specifically excluded these categories. When different sets of disorders such as these are lumped together in different ways, as they are in available studies, the value of descriptors of "typical" portrayals is lessened.

In addition, the locus of judgment may lead to differences in outcome. Many of the studies in this review used indirect sources of information about mental illness depiction—indices and film and program descriptions. Use of such indices probably underestimates the extent of media presentation of mental illness because only depictions in which mental illness is a major or central theme are likely to be listed, and, even then, some portrayals are likely to go unmentioned in favor of a focus on other story elements. Moreover, indices already involve someone else's judgment (often a layperson's judgment) about the presence of mental illness in the depiction and may introduce unknown biases; what one person views as mental illness may be different from what another would see as evidence of psychopathology, and both may differ from the diagnostic definitions applied by mental health professionals. Even when ratings are based on direct viewing/reading, the locus of identification of mental illness may create differences in ratings. Wahl and Roth (1982), for example, restricted their observations to characters labeled mentally ill by some other character in the same TV program, whereas Winick (1978) included characters who were judged to be mentally ill based on their film behavior. A character attempting suicide but not directly labeled mentally ill might be included in one set of ratings but not the other.

In continuing to study media portrayals of mental illness, research that involves direct viewing and rating of presentations would seem to offer greater promise of more accurately documenting the presence and nature of mental illness themes and characters.
in the media. In addition, clear and specific criteria for identifying an instance of mental illness depiction need to be established for raters (rather than relying on individualized judgments of what may or may not be mental illness); I would favor, for example, the presence, within the media presentation, of a specific psychiatric label (including slang designations such as "crazy," "madman," etc., as well as formal diagnoses such as schizophrenia or depression) or indication of receipt of psychiatric treatment as the appropriate criteria. Furthermore, it is this author's recommendation that mental retardation, substance abuse, and organic disorders associated with aging be treated separately from other psychiatric disorders in examining media portrayals; these exclusions would yield a less contaminated picture of the kinds of conditions most mental health professionals and advocates are thinking about when they express concerns about public views of mental illness.

Better still would be a breakdown of portrayals into more specific diagnostic categories. Even the exclusion of mental retardation, substance abuse, and disorders of old age still leaves a large category of very diverse disorders. Whether the inaccurate representation of mental illness in general applies to all the specific disorders within that broad category is uncertain; there may, in fact, be some disorders that are quite accurately represented in the mass media. It would be worthwhile to ask the same questions about specific disorders that have been asked about "mental illness," generally, in this review. This author, for example, is currently undertaking a study of the information content of articles about schizophrenia in popular magazines over the past 20 years. Similar studies of other disorders and other media would provide a more differentiated view of media depiction of mental disorders.

There is a particular need for further research to explore the impact of media images of mental illness. As is apparent from this review, there have been only a small number of such studies to date, several of which did not even include statistical analyses. Those attempting direct assessment of media impact, moreover, have focused only on the effects of single presentations. What may be a larger effect of the overall pattern of unfavorable mental illness depictions suggested by frequency and content analyses is not addressed by these event-focused studies. In addition, the direct impact studies have looked only at the immediate effect of the media depiction on stated attitudes and fail to demonstrate a long-term impact on public thinking and behavior. Because mental health concerns about media impact typically infer cumulative and longlasting effects of pervasive unfavorable portrayals of mentally ill persons, it would seem particularly important to add research that looks at the effect of multiple exposures to "stigmatizing" media presentations and to include follow-up over a longer time period to ascertain whether these effects are more than just short-lived reactions.

Finally, there are noteworthy gaps in the media studied, with television the only medium to receive extensive scrutiny. Examination of daily newspapers, for example, is minimal. Although a few studies give information about the nature of newspaper articles with mental health themes, studies looking at the prevalence and impact of newspaper coverage are lacking. Given the reported reliance of the public on daily newspapers for much of their information about current events and the impressions of many observers that headlines about mentally ill killers or insanity defenses, for example, are increasingly common, this is a significant omission. Studies of popular books are also absent, despite the seeming proliferation of serial killer novels. Even theatrical films have received less attention than would seem warranted by the recent success of such films as "Silence of the Lambs" and the earlier popularity of psycho-killer movies.
such as "Halloween" and "Friday the 13th." Finally, there is the commonly overlooked category of advertising and humor. Jokes, cartoons, and advertisements using slang terms for mental illness are frequently noted by mental health advocates as key examples of the trivialization and stigmatization of mental illness (e.g., Elliott, 1992; Wahl & Harman, 1989), but there appears to be no systematic examination of these sources available.

Summary

There is empirical evidence that mass media are informing the public about mental illness through their presentations on a frequent and regular basis and that their depictions of mental illness are characteristically inaccurate and unfavorable. There is a smaller body of research that supports the widespread concern that such images have a harmful effect on public perceptions of mental illness. However, limitations in the number, age, and content of available studies lessen our ability to make firm statements about the present state of media images of mental illness. A substantial amount of additional research—updating, refining, and expanding what is currently available—is needed to complete our understanding.

References


