The Stigmatization of Schizophrenia in the Media

ANONYMOUS

“Don’t eat that meal! Your mother poisoned it.”
“Your uncle is coming to plot my death! Lock the door!”

Despite the endless warnings my father has given me, I have always been distraught over his irrational behavior. He barges into my room to ensure my safety, he blames my family and me for supposedly snooping into his bedroom, and he believes that people are seeking to plot his death. When my father was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, my eyes opened up to a compassionate father to whom I was once blind.

Individuals with mental disorders such as schizophrenia are often portrayed as violent and likely to inflict harm to themselves or others. The media has glamorized schizophrenics as psychopathic individuals incapable of living normal lives; this is evident as schizophrenics have been associated with shootings, murder, or other violent actions in the media. In fact, when a person seems to conduct an extreme or violent action that is out of the ordinary, the media places the blame on a mental disorder, and one that is easily targeted is schizophrenia. These degrading stereotypes appear in films such as Sybil, Savage Grace, and Misery. However, a successful and enjoyable life is most definitely attainable for those with this mental illness, along with many other disorders, as long as one properly takes his or her medication and has a sturdy support system, as my father does.

Schizophrenia is a chronic and debilitating brain disorder that affects about 1% of Americans (“Schizophrenia” 1). Schizophrenics can hear fictional voices or observe hallucinations. As a result, the media rarely depicts a mentally ill individual as one who is capable of living a successful life. Instead, it tends to ignore such possibilities and depicts him or her in the most negative light possible. Films and television show schizophrenics robbing banks, plotting murders, or exhibiting violent conduct. Our culture tends to stigmatize the disorder, which causes viewers to almost pity the mentally disabled. However, scientific research affirms that with proper treatment and support, a schizophrenic can thrive socially in the workplace and in family life (“Schizophrenia” 1). Of course,
the media rarely sheds a candid light on the disorder because it
does not entice a wide audience; the media’s goal is to
entertain the audience so it represents individuals who are
most susceptible to such atypical conduct and human
compulsion as solely abnormal.

Many popular films have revealed stereotypes of this disorder
and have caused the propagation of fallacious portrayals. In
the film *Savage Grace*, the schizophrenic character, Anthony,
engages in an incestuous relationship with his mother while
murdering her at the end of the movie. Additionally, in the
movie *Sybil*, the protagonist, Sybil, who is diagnosed with
Dissociative Identity Disorder, dissociates violently with suicidal
tendencies. Finally, the movie *Orphan* depicts a mentally
disabled girl who is adopted by a family. Her devilish character
causes her to murder members of her adopted family while
manipulating her adoptive mother (Simpson 1). These movies
expose the unpredictable judgments of schizophrenic
characters. Research has proven that violence and suicide are
not consequences of this disorder yet the media disregards
authentic research in the hopes of fulfilling an audience’s
impulse towards sensationalism. In all movies that negatively
portray schizophrenics, the plot is dependent on the
character’s atypical behavior, which unfortunately stigmatizes
the character for the predicaments that arise.

Moreover, the portrayal of schizophrenia in the media has
been widely censured by many scholars. For instance, Dr.
Patricia Owen, a psychology professor at St. Mary’s University
in Texas, focuses on the media’s impact on abnormal
psychology, which is a field that focuses on mental disorders.
In researching for her article, “Portrayals of Schizophrenia by
Entertainment Media: A Content Analysis of Contemporary
Movies,” she discovered 41 characters with schizophrenia in
the past two decades who erroneously represented the illness.
Cinematic representations of schizophrenia typically
stereotype and misrepresent related symptoms; as a result,
the media perpetuates inaccurate portrayals of this disorder to
the public. The “homicidal maniac” motif has been prevalent in
movies (83%) when in reality, few schizophrenics are actually
violent; they are more likely to be victims of violence rather
than perpetrators. Dr. Owen’s movie analyses reveal
protagonists with visual or auditory hallucinations when
patients may rarely have visual hallucinations but auditory
hallucinations instead. Her research also reveals how the movies portrayed 69% of these individuals to self-harm when only 10-16% of schizophrenics are actually known to self-harm. Additionally, it has been proven that antipsychotic medications are effective and can mitigate the symptoms of schizophrenia whereas some films imply that a sympathetic or a significant other can diminish psychotic episodes (Owen 2).

Consequently, the media may stigmatize an individual with schizophrenia as a psychopathic murderer or another invalid stereotype due to the lack of understanding of mental disorders. Movies commonly feature atypical, exaggerated moments from characters’ lives—especially those with mental disorders—in order to create grandiose crime schemes. Thus, blaming one’s action on his or her mental disorder alleviates personal responsibility, as well as the audience’s worries regarding why a person might commit such an act. Realistically, such plots are simply the product of the extreme imaginative abilities of a scene writer.

For instance, in Stephen King’s 1990 movie Misery, Annie Wilkes is a schizophrenic woman who experiences delusions and commits extreme violence due to her irrational logic. In the movie, she encounters a famous actor who is recovering from a vehicle accident. She cares for him in her home where her violent behavior escalates as she cuts off his foot with an axe and slices off his thumb due to her delusions about the actor’s apparent mischief. These disorder-related delusions cause her to plot revenge on her hostage. Annie is the archetypal schizophrenic stigmatized in the media. Her extreme actions do not correlate with actual research, yet she is portrayed as a socially isolated and murderous woman. This popular film, which earned approximately $61 million about two decades ago (Martin 1), exemplifies the dissemination of false notions about mental health and has misinformed an alarming amount of people on the realities of schizophrenia.

The media’s propagation and reinforcement of these stereotypes is especially detrimental to those who have schizophrenia or who interact with schizophrenic patients. The public becomes misinformed and characterizes mental health patients as crazy because of fictional examples, revealing the media’s distorted view and lack of sympathy. Due to stereotypical views, many people who watch these movies may
not believe that schizophrenics can succeed in life. However, there are numerous success stories unknown to the general public. For instance, Kylie Griffin who was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 28, states:

I was diagnosed with schizophrenia a decade ago and in my search to understand my new illness, the media offered me a skewed vantage point where it appeared schizophrenia was simply a license for bad behavior. Now, on the inside looking out, I recognize what an inaccurate portrayal this is, the exception rather than the rule. Like many living with schizophrenia, there are so many people like me out there succeeding, living, working, raising families and contributing. Stigma stops these same people from putting their hand up to say they are living meaningful, purposeful lives. This is to the detriment of those newly diagnosed with schizophrenia seeking hope for recovery and society at large. (Griffin 1)

Kylie’s statement reveals the first-hand experience of a schizophrenic and the struggles of being falsely labeled as unsuccessful. Inaccurate labels reveal the additional hardships that schizophrenics must face besides coping with their actual illness. Yet, Griffin is a prime example of a successful and typical person raising a family and working despite her illness; she does not allow that to inhibit her from thriving in the social or corporate world. There are numerous others living well just like Kylie. Unfortunately, the media will rarely portray the successes of schizophrenics, because film directors would rather capitalize on irrational or outrageous actions needed to further a suspenseful plot. It is illogical to believe that schizophrenics are not able to succeed—as with a physical disorder, proper medication and support will enable many of them to thrive.

Films that do genuinely portray schizophrenia should be commended for their veracity. Such films rise above common generalities reinstated by prior films and harmful beliefs. A Beautiful Mind (2002) features John Nash, a brilliant man from Princeton University, who suffers from schizophrenia and finds it difficult to maintain meaningful relationships when he chooses to terminate his antipsychotic medications. However,
when John takes his medication, he learns to cope with his disorder, ignore hallucinations, and eventually goes on to receive the Nobel Memorize Prize in economics. This film depicts the effects of schizophrenia on the family and friends of the diagnosed, yet it also highlights the potential successes of a schizophrenic who receives proper support and medication. The movie captures the protagonist’s persevering heart, rather than capturing another sensational murder scene. Mental illness, in general, is a common motif in the horror genre, although it should be used to inform the public, and bring inspiration and hope, as it does in *A Beautiful Mind*.

Since movies so often negatively represent mental disorders, related horror themes must be terminated so that they are not internalized by the viewers. The public needs to be better educated about mental health. Many who suffer with or know of those affected by this disease find it extremely challenging to face a society that is ignorant to the reality. Thus, all films that feature schizophrenia or another mental disorder should be screened by mental health experts to determine if degrading stereotypes are included. If so, the film should include a disclaimer stating that it does not accurately portray individuals living with this disorder. Movie directors should also be ethically pressured by mental health associations to direct a more realistic illustration of schizophrenia since such movies proliferate biases in the public. Consequently, the stigma of mental disorders—and those who suffer from them—may be reduced through a more thorough review and critique of movies.

The gravity of these pervasively damaging depictions is significantly disheartening to those diagnosed or those who have family members with this illness, including myself. There must be sensitivity towards the subject of mental disorders, especially when a family member or friend has one, since some disorders may progressively deteriorate one’s mental function. Movies like *Sybil*, *Misery*, and *Orphan* perpetuate the image of the schizophrenic with a proclivity toward violence, suicide, or social failure. Still, research supports that there is hope for those living with schizophrenia. My own father is my personal reminder of the realities of this disorder. His hard work and dedication to my family through his extensive hours working, caring, or praying for us, reveals a compassionate, successful,
and loving individual underneath the veil of stereotypes ubiquitous in American culture.

Works Cited


Works Consulted