“I am not Ashamed”: An Analysis of Wil Wheaton’s Mental Health Speech

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## Introduction

Until recently, mental health advocacy was an overlooked and unaddressed topic among politicians, celebrities, and other people of power or fame. When people of higher power do not address topics on mental health, normalization will not occur causing further problems to develop. More and more health advocates are coming forward, but the stigma around mental health and those who suffer still exist. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is an advocacy based group that grew to national levels to start conversations about mental health and helping those who suffer directly or indirectly. Each year, many conferences are held where people give speeches about how mental health has affected them and their loved ones and solutions to stop the stigma while finding ways to support.

In May of 2018, Wil Wheaton gave a powerful speech at the Ohio conference for the National Alliance on Mental Illness that sent waves of emotion to a wide range of audiences. Detailing his own issues with depression, using strong vocabulary to force emotion, and advocating for change, Wheaton turns the tides of many listeners and their stance on mental health. Understanding how academic scholars have studied mental health communications is an important outlook that will be addressed in this essay to help fully develop ideals that Wheaton claims in his speech. In this essay, I will also look at how Wheaton uses Bitzer’s rhetorical situation to show how mental health is a major issue in the United States. Furthermore, I will analyze his use of ultimate terms to bring those listening to his story emotions that Wheaton felt throughout his life. Finally, Wheaton uses concepts from Bercovitch’s american jeremiad as an outline for his speech presentation that gives conviction on today’s mental health stigma.

## Literature Review

Mental illness affects millions of Americans and is a problem experience around the world. Mental health advocate, Schiavo details in her article that one in every five adults in the United States will at some point in a given year experience some type of mental illness (Schiavo 2018). She uses a study done by the University of Missouri that found K-12 teachers do not feel adequately prepared to deal with topics on mental health or strategies to help those suffering. Furthermore, Schiavo quotes speakers at the National Alliance on Mental Illness to aid her argument for stopping the negative stigma that surrounds mental health.

Scholars, Holland and Blood studied the coverage of mental health topics from activists in Australian news media for the differences between mental health activism and mental health advocacy. The strategies that they found used in media were identified as: reclaiming madness and using humour; elevating the first person voice and experience; and resisting medicalization and recognizing the harm of psychiatric labels (Blood & Holland 2009). Blood and Holland make the argument that the literacy of those watching are not fully aware of what is being advocated for due to usage of medical terms, thus failing to reach to audiences experiencing mental illnesses who do not relate through terms used. They call for other health communication scholars to study more into mental health activism so that more attention is given to these areas of study.

After the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, sermons were given across the nation in this time of tragedy. Olufowote and Matusitz analyzed these sermons, specifically finding that of the seventy-three sermons given, twenty mentioned mental illness or mental health (Olufowote & Matusitz 2017). How those sermons were framed gave insight into how the clergy giving these sermons and those listening were given a different perspective of what mental health is. Each of the twenty sermons were placed into two categories: social support and social systems. The study found that clergy determined the casual of mental health issues were from lack of care and social support for those who struggle with mental illnesses. It also found that clergy advocated for said support and care for those who suffer and their families (Olufowote & Matusitz 2017). Their main argument is for more support on mental health issues from those who are religious figures within a church.

The surge of social media has broadened studies among communication scholars immensely. Quintero, Yilmaz, and Najarian took the perceptions, beliefs, and information processing of mental health from college students and analyzed how they change because of social media testimonials. The study is significant because it found those who read testimonials through Facebook retained the information better than those on Twitter (Quintero, Yilmaz, & Najarian 2017). Quintero, Yilmaz, and Najarian believe that social media has a negative affect in mental health information and is also less persuasive on its impact.

All of the studies mentioned give an understanding on what we do know about mental health advocacy and information through communication studies. Each mention how every source of activism fails in some aspect of communicating positive effects for mental disorders. What Wil Wheaton’s mental health speech does well is communicate positive effects of searching for aid while dealing with chronic depression and anxiety. What these studies fail to look at is how celebrities could have a potential impact on mental health advocacy and how speaking to a political lobbying group could have benefits for what the studies fail to do and what they’re trying to achieve.

## Context

Wil Wheaton, star in the old *Star Trek* series and special guest on the show *Big Bang Theory,* gives a speech on his own struggles on living with chronic depression and anxiety. Before he starts his speech, he gives the audience a trigger warning for suicide, self harm, and other hard topics, so I would like to give the same warning. Wheaton begins his speech by listing his accomplishments in life: wife, kids, best selling narrator for audiobooks, and the awards he has received for acting. Acknowledging that he has lived a privileged life, Wil states that in spite of all of that, he struggles every day to feel worthy as a human being to live. Standing in front of at least six hundred individuals, he no longer feels ashamed to say that he lives with chronic depression. Through speaking at this conference, he wants to “to end the stigma and prejudice that surrounds mental illness in America.” Wheaton then goes into chronological order of how he started experiencing anxiety at a young age. As he got older, and more famous, panic attacks started becoming so frequent that it was part of his daily routine to try to hide it from family and other loved ones. Once he started working on the show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, depression then became another mental illness he had to cope with on his own. In his twenties, Wheaton recalls the daily struggle of wanting to live and experiencing suicidal thoughts for the first time. This is where his speech shifts for advocacy and understanding for mental health issues. In his thirties, he finally overcame the need to hide and asked his doctor to help him with therapy and medication to help with what he was living with every day.

## Analysis

Wheaton’s speech uses Bitzer’s rhetorical situation to help the audience understand what he is advocating for. Three components make up the rhetorical situation. First, there needs to be an exigence. An exigence is a problem that calls for someone to act or speak towards making change (Bitzer 1992). For Wheaton, it is the lack of help for those suffering with chronic depression and anxiety and the stigma that surrounds mental health. He continuously advocates for change stating “There is no reason to feel embarrassed when you reach out to a professional for help.” Second, Bitzer states that there needs to be an audience. A rhetorical situation can only have change through its audience. Having an audience of over second hundred people present and through the internet, Wheaton’s speech has multiple directions for change in action. Lastly, a situation has its constraints. People, objects, events and other things can be constraints if they limit action from happening for the exigence. During his speech, Wheaton has difficulty speaking about a moment in his life where he suffered the heaviest panic attack, saying

“I clearly remember being twenty-two, living in my own house, waking up from a panic attack that was so terrifying just writing about it for this talk gave me so much anxiety I almost cut this section from my speech.”

This constraint is his inability to detail his panic attack because it would bring back the stress of having said panic attack. Though some would say credibility, or ethos, is lost because he cannot overcome this emotion, I believe it only adds to his credibility of what it takes to speak up for what he is going through. Another constraint facing Wil is what he is advocating for could be a financial burden for some. He tries to combat this constraint with mentioning free health care, but the United States currently does not offer free health care for its citizens.

Weaver describes ultimate terms as “simply a name capable of entering into a proposition” (Weaver 1955). Words that provoke positive meaning fit into the God term category. Respectively, words that foster a negative connotation are categorized into Devil terms. Charismatic terms are words that have no true referent. Wheaton uses God term subtly throughout his speech giving light to the end of his dark tunnels. At the end of his speech, he “hopes to speak out about mental health so much that one day, it will be wholly unremarkable to stand up” and not feel ashamed using hope as his God term to ensure positive change. When Wil talks about his experience with suicidal thoughts, he uses suicide to provoke feelings of normalcy because those suffering might undergo through. Though suicide is made to be a devil term in the sense that it provoke negative connotations, Wheaton asks for change of the stigma and for the use of medication to combat these dark thoughts.

For Bercovitch’s american jeremiad, a three part structure is used to lay out the artifact at hand. Many political speeches use this structure to invoke change through illuminating the currently bad situation and showing how to get to a better outcome for the future. A precedent that lays out communal norms is typically the beginning of the american jeremiad structure (Bercovitch 2012). Then, a condemnation for the state of which the problem is currently subsiding. Finally, to complete the structure, an announcement for positive change to come. How Wheaton’s speech mimics the structure of the american jeremiad is mostly through the last two structures. Laying out the communal normal is part of his condemnations as a society. He argues that the normalcy of not talking about mental illnesses is not a societal norm that should be continued. Without changing the stigma around mental health, no one will seek treatment, which is something he unfortunately fell into. Another condemnation Wheaton argues against is the lack of education around mental health and lack of strategies being taught to help those who are suffering. He remembers going to his mother for comfort during one of his worst panic attacks and her only response was that “you’re just realizing that the world is a scary place.” He asks the audience to not judge his mother, but to see how even the closest people to you might not know how to handle mental illnesses. The last quarter of his speech gives examples about how change can occur. He lists some things that can help with in the moment needs when things are really bad with depression like taking a shower, doing yoga or guided meditation. Also, Wil Wheaton advocates for seeking therapy and medication when depression has overcome a person's body and will to keep living. Without the last part of the structure, he’d leave those listening to hopelessness and isolation.

## Discussion

Overall, Wil Wheaton is clear on his message for mental health advocacy and is speaking to the right crowd on making the change against the stigma around mental illnesses. The important overall theme for seeking help and not just leaving the audience without solutions shows that Wheaton clearly thought through is speech and genuinely cares for those suffering through what he did. Utilizing Bercovitch’s american jeremiad was thoughtful on providing what exactly is wrong and how change can happen. Sharing his own experiences through raw detail and emotion gives Wheaton the credibility to stand among six hundred mental health lobbyists and justify his cry for change. What other scholarships lack is by not looking further into the experiences that people are sharing about their own mental illness struggle. What is more convincing for most are stories, not statistics.

## Conclusion

How Wil Wheaton uses ultimate terms to provoke emotion in listeners and the use of the rhetorical situation to clarify the problem surrounding mental health reveals the time he put into his advocation of mental health. Furthermore, his speech reflecting the structure of the jeremiad brings to light each problem that Wheaton argues for and the solutions to fight against mental health stigmas.

Looking more in depth on individuals experiences, especially those with fame or political power can give insight into perception changes among different types of demographics and populations. Changing the stigma around mental health will only come through communication and understanding of individual stories and feeling emotions that others go through.

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