**‘Why so serious?’ *Joker* perpetuates prejudice against those with mental illness**

Hannah Zimmerman, Hannah Boden, Sarah Graham, Taylor Winter, Benjamin C. Riordan, John A. Hunter, Damian Scarf

**Introduction**

The Warner Bros.’s movie *Joker* is the first R-rated film to top the $1 billion mark at the box office, with well over 100,000,000 people viewing the movie worldwide. The movie provides the Jokers Origin story, played by award winning actor Joaquin Phoenix. Phoenix’s character Arthur is depicted as having a mental illness, Arthur visits *Arkham State Hospital* to receive medication and frequently displays symptoms that suggest some form of serious mental illness (e.g., delusions, hallucinations). With respect to the plot, Arthur stops receiving his medication, due to budget cuts, and subsequently descends into “madness”. What follows is a campaign of graphic violence carried out by Arthur.

Of concern, is the fact that *Joker* continues the tradition of movies depicting people with mental illness as violent1, which may perpetuate prejudice toward those with mental illness. To investigate whether watching the Joker increased prejudice, we randomised members of the community to watch either Joker or *Terminator: Dark Fate* (control condition) and measured prejudice2 both before and after the film.

**Method**

Participants were randomly assigned to a theatre showing *Joker* (*n* = 80) or *Terminator* (*n* = 84). Both samples had similar distributions in age, sex, and ethnicity (Table 1). Participants completed the Prejudice towards People with Mental Illness (PPMI) scale2 and demographic information online before the movie, then completed the PPMI directly after viewing their assigned movie.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for both Joker and Terminator movie conditions.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Joker | Terminator |
| N | 84 | 80 |
| Females | 63.1% | 61.3% |
| Age (M [SD]) | 30 [10.5] | 30 [9.8] |
| European | 60.7% | 38.8% |
| Asian | 27.4% | 32.5% |
| Maori or Pacifica | 11.9% | 15.0% |
| Other ethnicity | 10.7% | 13.8% |

**Results**

Change in prejudice was assessed using a lagged Bayesian regression, using a weakly informative normal prior with mean zero and standard deviation of one. Specifically, we predicted prejudice after the movie while controlling for pre-movie prejudice and included age, gender, mental illness history, and movie as covariates. Our analysis indicated that participants who watched *Joker* increased their level of prejudice by 0.37 (95% CI [0.19, 0.55]) standard deviations relative to participants who watched *Terminator* (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Standardised effects, 95% credible intervals, and posterior probabilities (pp) of lagged Bayesian regression analysis on change in prejudice after watching *Joker*.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | 95% Credible Interval | |  |
|  | Estimate | Lower | Upper | pp |
| Intercept | 0.08 | -0.11 | 0.27 | 83.6% |
| Prejudice (lag) | 0.91 | 0.80 | 1.02 | 100.0% |
| Age | 0.02 | -0.07 | 0.11 | 74.1% |
| Sex (female) | 0.00 | -0.19 | 0.18 | 50.2% |
| Mental health history | -0.21 | -0.41 | 0.00 | 100.0% |
| Movie (Joker) | 0.37 | 0.19 | 0.55 | 100.0% |
| NB: posterior probability is the probability an effect deviates from zero in its given direction. | | | | |

**Discussion**

Participants who watched *Joker* significantly increased prejudice against those with mental illness. Moreover, a disposition toward controlling others (i.e., authoritarianism) exacerbated the impact of the *Joker* on prejudice. Beyond the direct consequences of prejudice on interpersonal interactions with those with mental illness, associating mental illness with violence may decrease support for policies and positions that we know are beneficial for those with mental illness (e.g., integration into communicates, employment). Additionally, stigma is a key barrier to treatment and the movie may increase the stigma felt by those with a mental illness

The negative impact of movies such as *Joker* may be reduced or eliminated by explicitly stating before the movie that the depiction of mental illness in the movie is inaccurate, that the link between mental illness and violence is weak, and that most people with mental illness are not violent4.

*‘Why so serious?’* is a line spoken by the Joker in an earlier movie, *The Dark Knight*. One might level that line at the authors of the current study, arguing that *Joker* is simply a work of fiction and nothing to be concerned about. What this view ignores, is the profound impact that stigma, and the prejudice therein, has on those suffering from a mental illness.

**References**

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