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The Media's Misrepresentation of Personality Disorders

Mass media has historically had a significant impact on public perception. In a world of readily available information, more and more people have been diagnosed with mental health problems, and awareness for this issue has been rising. However, unlike some other mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, schizophrenia and disorders involving personality have been a focal point for the plots of television, movies, and other forms of media in a dramatized light, providing for genres such as mystery, horror, and even comedy. As the media continues to dramatize these personality disorders, the public's perception of people who are diagnosed with schizophrenia changes. However, because dramatization usually embellishes on the reality, media created with a personality disorder at the center of the plot often misrepresent the true nature of the people who suffer from these disorders. This effects change on the perception of the approximate 39 million people worldwide affected by this disorder, one of the top 15 causes of disability. In the United States alone, schizophrenic patients have their average lifespan cut by 28.5 years, and have a higher rate of other major co-occurring medical conditions, with 4.9% of schizophrenics dying by suicide, compared to the national average of 0.014%.^{1 2} Thus, it is important for the media to stop the misrepresentation of schizophrenics and other personality disorders in order to bring more awareness and educate the public on the true nature of the disorders and their effects on human behavior.

In the peer-reviewed article, "Hollywood Schizophrenia," Allison Smith and Stephen Cooper discuss the misrepresentation of schizophrenia in films and the negative impact that has on public perception. They argue that schizophrenia and other personality disorders are misconstrued on multiple counts: their development in individuals, their effect on behavior, and the distinction between schizophrenia and other diseases. One of the examples comes from one of the first dramatizations of an individual with multiple personalities, Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film, *Psycho*. In this film, a man with split personality turns from harmless to murderous as a result of trauma from his mother's death. As the basis of "hollywood schizophrenia," this portrayal provided many inaccuracies regarding the actual nature of schizophrenia. The development of schizophrenia is often biological rather than a result of past trauma, something that might lead to another disease called Dissociative Identity Disorder. This created one of the greatest misconceptions surrounding schizophrenia, that it develops as a result of childhood upbringing. In reality, schizophrenia develops as a result of "disturbances in brain development and disturbances in the brain dopamine system."³ Furthermore, while DID provides a better fit for the true nature of the "split personality" condition, both these diseases generally result in non-violent behavior, and more typically a withdrawal from society as a whole. Aggressiveness in schizophrenics and those with DID are possible, but usually result from "a steady progression

from increasing suspicion of people surrounding the patient to frank hostility...usually recognized by nurses or family who know the patient well.”⁴ The paper’s examination on the effect of the media portrayal on society involved an interview with a high-profile schizophrenic willing to speak out, Ian Chovil. He identifies some good and bad points of certain films, citing a dangerous example of *Fight Club*’s portrayal of someone with personality disorder for schizophrenics. “At the end of the movie, the main character shoots a hole through his own cheek in an attempt to destroy his hallucinated alter-ego - and it works.”⁵ This, of course, provides a horrible example for copycats and struggling schizophrenics who may be desperate to cure themselves, with Chovil stating, “I know people who start cutting themselves to get rid of their delusions when symptoms flare up. I hope none of them see this film.”⁶ This paper shines light not only on how schizophrenia is misrepresented, but also brings in the aspect of how misrepresentation can even affect those suffering from the disease.⁷

In a study conducted by the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Leipzig, the ways in which schizophrenia is portrayed in the media was correlated against people’s desire for social distance towards those with the mental illness. This study focused mainly on the differing effects of media consumption through television and that of through newspapers. The sample used for this experiment involved citizens all above the age of eighteen, and were questioned about how often they watch television and what channels, as well as their frequency of reading the newspaper. After analyzing all of the data that was collected, it was concluded that “the desire for social distance towards people with schizophrenia increases almost continuously with the amount of TV consumption.”⁸ In addition, there was not nearly as strong of evidence when observing the correlation between this variable and the amount of newspaper consumption. However, a conclusion was reached that the desire for social distance is largely dependent on the type of newspaper, rather than the amount that is read. Based on this data, those who conducted the study included a “Discussion” portion of their research paper to include their own opinions as to why these results were found. They determined that images are more powerful and influential than reading. Additionally, television shows were seen as more targeted to the emotions of the viewers, contrasting with the informative purpose of newspapers. The exception to this is the use of tabloid papers, which did show a spike in desire for social distance when compared to other types of newspapers, as they are often sensationalized and emotionally provoking. Therefore, there is an underlying understanding that television shows and tabloid journals demonstrate dramatized and unfavorable portrayals of those with schizophrenia, as they result in those who consume the media to feel an urge to reject the victims of the mental illnesses.

The thriller movie *Split*, released in 2016, delves into the story of Kevin Wendell Crumb, a man with Dissociative Identity Disorder, a condition that causes him to develop 23 unique personalities. Crumb kidnaps a group of girls outside a shopping area and traps them in his underground lair as his personalities argue about what to do with them. The movie shows scenes of rapid changes in personality; in one scene, the changes are almost instantaneous as the

personalities battle each other inside their own body. At the climax of the movie, a dark 24th personality is revealed; the “Beast” transforms into a superhuman entity, carnivorously eating two of the girls and tearing apart steel bars in attempt to reach the third.⁹ Movies like *Split* use mental illness to instill fear in audience by shrouding them in wonder and mystery. By hiding the reasoning behind the illness, the audience is left not knowing how it will manifest next, causing uneasy fascination and nervous anticipation. These movies, instead of portraying the illness through facts and science, use them as a plot point to establish characters that are dangerous to society and are often the antagonist of the story. After all, if people do not truly understand how mental illness works, they are more inclined to be afraid of it. These portrayals may be entertaining but they do more harm than good. They popularize negative stereotypes about mental illnesses; for example, research has shown that people with Dissociative Identity Disorder are rarely violent, yet this is exactly how the movie attempts to portray it. This portrayal causes the public to be less accepting with people of DID and less willing to consider their experiences and what they have gone through. It could also result in people with DID being ashamed of their illness or be hesitant to get diagnosed out of fear.



Shown above is the superhuman 24th personality of Crumb, called, “the Beast,” who suddenly develops intense strength and a ferocious bloodthirst not seen in other personalities.¹⁰

In contrast, the movie *A Beautiful Mind*, released in 2001, does a much better and more accurate job at portraying people with mental illnesses. This movie follows the true story of mathematician John Forbes Nash as he struggles to balance his career and personal life with his schizophrenia diagnosis.¹¹ *A Beautiful Mind* shows the day-to-day lives of those with schizophrenia, portraying them as normal people and emphasizing the conflicts they encounter every day. It allows the audience to step into the perspective of a character with schizophrenia, illustrating their humanity and similarity to the viewer. These based-on-real-life portrayals of mental illness do a lot to educate audiences about the true nature of mental illness and creates a sense of understanding amongst a community and sympathetic support for those suffering from the illness. Interviews of real people with the illness, such as the “Meet the Mother with 20

Personalities” video by the Oprah Winfrey Show also accomplish a similar feat by exposing the public to the science and truth behind the illness and putting a relatable face to the illness.¹²



The above scene in *A Beautiful Mind* shows the character with schizophrenia as a human being with normal human emotions and concerns by placing him with his child and provides insight into the difficult that his mental illness brings him.¹³

It is difficult to find music about schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder, due to their taboo status within the general population. The few songs that have attempted to delve into these mental disorders tend to come from genres steeped in rebellion and protest, such as rap and rock. Arguably the most high-profile song about mental illness is “Brain Damage” from the 1973 Pink Floyd album *The Dark Side of the Moon*, one of the most critically-acclaimed albums of all time. The song was inspired by former band member Syd Barrett, who had begun to exhibit symptoms synonymous with schizophrenia after years of heavy usage of psychedelic drugs (he was never formally diagnosed).¹⁴ However, the song fails to convey any meaningful information to its audience. Due to *The Dark Side of the Moon* being a concept album, each of the songs had to tie into one overarching theme throughout the entire listen, and as a result, “Brain Damage” has no time for proper discussion. Furthermore, its lyrics reinforce stereotyped notions about schizophrenia, depicting an unsettle, social outcast that does not belong in mainstream society. This is most likely due to the band’s lack of accurate knowledge. When popular, influential artists fail to accurately depict such a topic as schizophrenia, it only reinforces the negative reception of people who already suffer from the disorder.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, media representations of mental illnesses such as schizophrenia are often dramatized and inaccurate. Movie characters suffering from schizophrenia are often depicted as violent people who are a danger to society. One of our recommendations is that the “real-life” label of schizophrenia is removed from these fictional representations. We wish for the actual name of the disease to only be associated with accurate portrayals of it. In doing so, some of the stigma currently associated with schizophrenia will disappear. Second, instead of dramatizing the false aspects of schizophrenia in movies and other

media, we wish for the real elements of schizophrenia to be dramatized. This will better inform the public of the genuine symptoms of schizophrenia and thus generate a more precise representation of schizophrenia in the media. Finally, another recommendation we have is for there to be more media exposure to real cases of schizophrenia without dramatization. This means more interviews with people suffering from schizophrenia on popular talk shows (similar to Oprah Winfrey's interview with Kim Noble), documentaries, etc. These types of media will show people who actually suffer from the disease, rather than actors who pretend to have it. This will inform the public of the daily lives of people living with schizophrenia, as well as how the disease affects the people around them.

The fascination of portraying mental illness through movies is reminiscent of what is discussed in the article "Reel Nature." This piece examines how people are intrigued by films depicting wildlife, untouched and natural. However, most of the movies have this as a facade, with numerous falsities existing within them. The article focuses on movies featuring dolphins, which are displayed in an exaggerated fashion.¹⁵ This is parallel to our findings of how schizophrenia is seen in movies. Audiences are intrigued to learn more about illnesses that they do not fully comprehend, but are left with a mind full of misrepresentation. As a result, we think that a more factual portrayal of people with schizophrenia may be less entertaining for audiences, but would undoubtedly have more favorable effects on the perceptions about those with mental illnesses. If schizophrenia and DID are shown in documentaries, they should also be geared towards people above the age of eighteen who will have greater capacity for empathy and understanding of people who differ from them.

Notes

1. "Schizophrenia," National Institute of Mental Health.
2. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, "Suicide Statistics."
3. Alison Smith, "Hollywood Schizophrenia," BMJ Publishing Group.
- 4-7. Ibid.
8. M.C. Angermeyer, "Media consumption and desire for social distance towards people with schizophrenia," *European Psychiatry*, 2005.
9. *Split*. DVD. Directed by M. Night Shyamalan, Universal Pictures, 2016.
10. <https://thehooksite.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/split.jpg>.
11. *A Beautiful Mind*. DVD. Directed by Ron Howard, Universal Pictures and DreamWorks Pictures, 2001.
12. Oprah Winfrey, "Meet the Mother with 20 Personalities."
13. <https://bplusmovieblog.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/a-beautiful-mind-15.png>.
14. Pink Floyd. *The Dark Side of the Moon*. Harvest, 1973, LP record.
15. Gregg Mitman, "A Ringside Seat in the Making of a Pet Star," in *Reel Nature*, (University of Washington Press, 2009), 157-179.

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