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The Media's Portrayal of Mental Illness and Its Treatment: An Analysis of the Existing Literature from a Social Work Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores established research concerning the influence of media portrayals of mental illness and its treatment on stigma, help-seeking behavior, and viewer awareness from a social work perspective. The purpose of this paper is to examine the validity and generalizability of the existing literature regarding the effects of the presence of themes of mental illlness in television and movies. Concerning the social work profession, there is discussion regarding the role that media portrayals of mental illness can have on clients' expectations for treatment and willingness to seek help. The referenced research examines the impact of depictions of mental illness in television shows specifically with criminal and medical themes. Focusing on authentic depictions of mental illness, research demonstrates that realistic, factually-based portrayals actively reduce stigma and associated stereotypes surrounding mental illness and its treatment. The identified limitations, lack of generalizability, and questionable validity with the existing research in this subject area demonstrate the need for more expansive, representative studies to be conducted.

The media has become an avenue through which viewers can experience the daily struggles of someone with a mental illness through his or her character and interactions with other characters. Many television shows and movies incorporate characters with various mental illnesses to increase viewers' connections with characters and bring a sense of normalcy to mental illness. Advocates for increasing mental health education and resources may argue that this window into the life of someone with a mental illness reduces the stigma surrounding mental health diagnoses and the seeking of treatment; however, the quality of the portrayal in the media has a strong influence on whether or not the exposure has a positive effect on viewers with or without a diagnosis of a mental illness. Chan and Yanos emphasize "that presentations of mental illness are usually inaccurate with an emphasis on negative attributes (e.g., social and occupational failures, psychotic symptoms); and...media portrayals are likely to have an impact on the public's perception of mental illness" (2016). Inaccurate or demeaning portrayals of mental illness can increase the stigma associated with diagnoses and treatment, further isolating people who have been diagnosed. Portrayals with authentic experiences that demonstrate support from other characters and realistic signs of the mental illness prove to be helpful in reducing stigmatic and stereotypical thinking in society and increasing help-seeking behavior in viewers. By positive or authentic, I make use of Hoffner and Cohen's (2015) conclusion that the develop-

ment of a parasocial relationship, or a "real social bond" with characters reflects an authentic or positive portrayal of mental illness. Portrayals of mental illness and its treatment should additionally be rooted in factual concepts and real experiences of those who have mental illnesses. The media can serve as a powerful tool for positively changing traditional attitudes held about mental health; however, producers must carefully navigate creating accurate and genuine depictions of mental illness and treatment. This article will review how mental illness and its treatment is portrayed in popular television shows and movies depicted in Table 1.

Television Show/Movie & Years Aired	Page Number	Author(s)
Grey's Anatomy (2005-present) *ER* (1994-2009)	4	Maier, Gentile, Vogel, and Kaplan (2014)
Law & Order, including subseries (1990-2010, subseries 1999-present)	4, 7	Maier, Gentile, Vogel, and Kaplan (2014); Parrot and Parrot (2015)
Criminal Minds (2005-2009)	4, 7	Maier, Gentile, Vogel, and Kaplan (2014); Parrot and Parrot (2015)
CSI (Crime Scene Investigation) (2000-2015)	4, 10	Maier, Gentile, Vogel, and Kaplan (2014)
Monk (2002-2009)	6	Hoffner and Cohen (2015)
Beverly Hills, 90210 (1990-2000)	8	Cohen, Alward, Zajicek, Edwards, and Hutson (2018)
Necessary Roughness (2011-2013)	9	Maier, Gentile, Vogel, and Kaplan (2014)

Table 1. Listing of Television Shows/Movies Analyzed by Cited Authors

Television shows and movies can spread powerful messages to large audiences. Harnessing this power to reduce stigma and increase help-seeking behaviors requires accurate and respectful portrayals of mental illness and treatment. With a surge in popularity of online streaming services, access to these portrayals is widely available for viewers of all ages. Considering the potential implications of this access, it is important to recognize that the media can be a strong influence when evaluating clients from a social work perspective. Chan and Yanos (2016) find that a majority of the media's portrayals of mental illness were negative and reflected stereotypical beliefs about mental health. With a barrage of negative portrayals of mental health diagnoses and the therapeutic process in the media, clients may be predisposed to unreasonable expectations of living with and receiving treatment for a mental illness. Social workers need to be prepared to take clients' individual experiences with the media into consideration through the assessment and treatment process.

The creation of an altered reality has been demonstrated by studies relating to television shows involving medical and criminal depictions. Maier, Gentile, Vogel, and Kaplan (2014) recognize that both medical- and crime-focused television shows have affected viewers' perceptions of medical professionals and engagement in criminal trials as jury members. Popular medical dramas including *Grey's Anatomy* and *ER* provide viewers with detailed accounts of interactions with medical professionals and descriptions of medical conditions. Those who watch medical dramas internalize information from episodes and utilize that information in making decisions regarding their own healthcare; consequently, researchers concluded that medical dramas were useful in raising awareness for certain conditions and increasing the likelihood to seek professional help for medical conditions (Maier et al., 2014). Medical shows with authentic portrayals have had a positive influence on viewers, demonstrating that the media can be a meaningful tool in reducing stigma and encouraging help-seeking behavior in viewers.

Like medical shows, criminal shows have proven to influence viewers' opinions regarding justice and criminal proceedings. Shows including *Law and Order* and its subseries, *Criminal Minds*, and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* allow viewers to explore the investigatory and judicial phases of criminal justice. However, criminal shows have institutionalized romanticized views of the legal system. Based on exposure to unrealistic accounts of courtroom proceedings and police investigations, viewers internalized these unrealistic expectations for the criminal justice system. Maier et al. (2014) explain that "The CSI Effect Hypothesis states that as audiences are exposed to procedural crime dramas, such as CSI, jurors develop

higher expectations for evidence and may, therefore, be more likely to ?nd a defendant not guilty based on an apparent lack of convincing evidence" (p. 240). The altered reality created by such inaccurate portrayals of the legal system can detrimentally impact participation in a real legal and court proceeding. The research behind medical and criminal shows demonstrates that the quality and authenticity of the portrayals has strong implications for the influence on viewers, whether the influence increases awareness and reduces stigma or increases unrealistic expectations. This influence on viewers of criminal procedural shows has direct consequences for defendants facing jury trials and procession of investigations.

Similarly, researchers have found that television and movie portrayals of mental illness have influenced viewers' understanding of various diagnoses, expectations for treatment, willingness to seek treatment, and stigma surrounding mental health. Henderson (2018) has found that fictional television, rather than factual sources, is the primary source of most viewers' understanding of information regarding both medical and psychological health. There is a challenging balance between the creation of realistic portrayals and maintenance of comedic entertainment for television producers to achieve. The positive influence of portrayals of mental health in the media hinges on authentic depictions that help reduce stigma and provide viewers with realistic characters and experiences.

One television show with a demonstrated positive influence on reducing stigma is *Monk*. *Monk* depicts the experiences of a detective named Adrian Monk who has been diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and suffers from multiple phobias. A cross-sectional study conducted via a Likert-response survey distributed to a population of 172 respondents, with 62 reporting a diagnosis and 61 reporting having a relative who has been diagnosed, demonstrated the positive influence of the media (Hoffer and Cohen, 2018). In their 2018 study concerning responses

in viewers with or without anxiety disorders, Hoffner and Cohen conclude that both groups of viewers who watched *Monk* "...exhibited fewer stereotypes of OCD/mental illness and a greater willingness to interact with people who have a mental illness" (p. 160). Hoffner and Cohen's 2015 study demonstrates that authentic depictions of mental illness can actively reduce stigmatization and isolation of those diagnosed with a mental illness. The small population of 172 respondents significantly inhibits the generalizability of the study. An overwhelming majority of the population identified as white or Caucasian, which could have created bias based on cultural attitudes toward mental health. Additionally, respondents to the survey were targeted based on their web searches related to mental health and illness, creating a sample that only represents viewers with a demonstrated interest in mental health. Due to the lack of representativeness in this study, results can only be applied to the sampling frame that consisted of people with reported search histories for mental illness and connections to someone diagnosed with a mental illness. The results of this study provide social workers with limited information due to its lack of generalizability and targeted population; however, it is imperative to consider the demonstrated implications of viewers' experiences with mental illness in the media when evaluating clients.

For fifteen seasons, the characters of the fictional FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) have been tracking down ruthless criminals in the series *Criminal Minds*. Unlike *Monk*, *Criminal Minds* provides viewers portrayals of mental illness in characters suspected of committing horrendous crimes. As agents from the BAU deliver a behavioral profile, many of the alleged perpetrators are identified as having a mental illness typically psychosis, schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder that is contributing to their criminal behavior. Perpetrators are often described as sadists, masochists, or psychotics. This identification of mental illness in criminals perpetuates the stereotype that

people with mental illness are violent, unstable, and more likely to commit violent crimes. Other criminal shows like *Law and Order* and *NCIS* similarly portray criminals with histories of mental illnesses. Because of the portrayals in these shows, viewers assume that most people diagnosed with psychotic disorders are violent criminals who need to be punished rather than treated appropriately. Crime shows often contain graphic and dramatized images and storylines, necessitating a warning for the audience prior to the start of an episode.

Parrott and Parrott (2015) initiated a study on 983 predominantly white, male characters from crime dramas, including *Criminal Minds and Law and Order*, with 52 (26 female, 26 male) identified as having at least one mental illness. Among the most common diagnoses for the included characters were substance abuse disorders and schizophrenia (Parrott and Parrott, 2015). This study produced important results, as it demonstrated that viewers' beliefs supported the hypothesis that people diagnosed with mental illness had a higher risk of being the victims of crimes. In addition, the study examined the effects of family status, employment, and socioeconomic status in the characterization of a person with mental illness. Consideration of these factors is imperative in creating a more complete understanding of how media portrayals can affect stigma, stereotypes, and prejudice. Parrott and Parrott's study included a variety of characters from different television shows, which created a more diverse representation of characters for respondents to analyze compared to Hoffner and Cohen's studies. The results demonstrate that mental illness does not discriminate among race, gender, or socioeconomic status. The prevalence of mental illness among various populations reflects the salience of cultural competence within social work practice, as clients come from diverse backgrounds, family structures, and financial situations. Like Hoffner and Cohen's studies, though, limitations in Parrot and Parrott's study inhibit the generalizability of

the results. Only correlational, not causal, relationships could be reported due to the language of the research questions and a lack of questions regarding the specific relationship between the media and stigma.

A study conducted by Cohen, Alward, Zajicek, Edwards, and Hutson (2018) demonstrates that the addition of an educational epilogue to a television show featuring a character diagnosed with bipolar disorder affected viewers' beliefs about mental health. Viewers were divided into two populations: those who watched the show with the epilogue and those who watched the show without the epilogue. Ninety college students, who were predominantly male, were randomly separated into two groups to view an episode of *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Cohen et al., 2018). Based on the results of a written survey, Cohen et al. (2018) concluded that the epilogue helped support viewers' educational understanding of bipolar disorder. As with previously mentioned studies, the small population greatly limits the generalizability of the results. With only 90 respondents from a convenience sample of young adults, the study was not representative of a larger population of television viewers. With a reliance on availability sampling, results may have been influenced by the fact that young adults, particularly in 2018, tend to be more open-minded concerning mental illness and recognize the consequences of stigmatizing behaviors on those diagnosed with a mental illness. Cohen et al. (2018) additionally recognized that the formal and regulated setting for viewing the episode may have influenced the respondents' answers to the survey, decreasing the validity of the data that was collected from the surveys.

In addition to including characters with specific mental illnesses, the media often tackles themes associated with the treatment of mental illnesses. *Necessary Roughness* follows a New York sports psychologist who was hired by a fictional professional football team to treat the players (Maier et al., 2014). Viewers of this show are exposed to a severe lack of boundaries in the

therapist-client relationship, treatments that completely resolved disorders in minimal sessions, and violations of confidentiality among the team's staff and coaches. The unconventional and unethical experiences throughout the series demonstrate the negative influence that the media can have on viewers' help-seeking behaviors. Throughout the series, the psychologist acted like a friend one would consult for advice, rather than a mental health professional who helps clients process experiences and develop coping skills. Featuring quick-fix treatments that fail to address the cause of the mental illness, the show perpetuates unrealistic expectations for the therapeutic process. Clients who have watched shows like *Necessary Roughness* may use the experiences of the players and the psychologist in their decision to seek help. Maier et al. (2014) found that viewers exposed to therapy in television shows were most influenced by characters who were created for comedic relief and did not display the typical characteristics of a psychologist. This influence has implications for social workers, who must be aware of clients' expectations for treatment and how these expectations may be shaped by the media. Educating clients with respect to the therapeutic process, therapeutic relationship, and confidentiality rules should be a top priority for social workers treating clients with a mental health issue.

With respect to the social work profession, social workers must take effects of media portrayals of mental health into account when assessing and planning interventions for clients. At the micro-level of intervention, social workers treating clients for mental illnesses should educate the client about expectations for treatment, work with the client to process the stereotypes associated with his or her diagnosis, and assess the client for internalized beliefs related to the media's portrayal of mental illness. At the mezzo- and macro-levels of intervention, social workers should be advocating for positive, authentic, and genuine depictions of mental illness and treatment to decrease stigma and stereotypes. Social work-

ers should additionally spread awareness concerning the detrimental consequences of exposure to negative portrayals in the media.

Much of the research concerning media portrayals of mental illness and treatment has supported that authentic depictions can actively reduce stigma and increase help-seeking. Conversely, inauthentic depictions can create misconceptions, unrealistic expectations, and altered views of the reality of living with and undergoing treatment for mental illness. Medical shows with authentic depictions proved to be beneficial in spreading awareness about specific medical conditions; however, inauthentic and inaccurate depictions of legal proceedings in shows like *CSI* have a significant influence on viewers, resulting in the "CSI Effect." Similar to authentic portrayals of medical conditions, the portrayal of OCD in *Monk* proved to aid in reducing the prevalence of stereotypes surrounding the disorder. Despite results demonstrating this positive reduction, severe limitations in the studies including the demographic profile of the population studied, size of the group studied, and cultural influences, the conclusions drawn from the studies lack generalizability and validity of results. Recent research does suggest, however, that media portrayals are more beneficial than detrimental. The most pressing issue is the need for larger studies with more representative samples that have the potential to produce valid, generalizable results.

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