

Tiffany Kellstrom

Honors Capstone

Professor McLaughlin & Professor Ignagni

12 November 2022

Psychological Disorders as Seen in Film

Psychological disorders and mental health in general have been a taboo topic for years. In the most recent years, it has become a topic of discussion people are not afraid to have. There has been an increase in the number of people diagnosed with a mental disorder because they are no longer afraid to speak up about what they are experiencing and feeling and seek help. But why did it take so long to get to this point? The progression of psychological disorders moving from a taboo topic to being accepted by most of society can be seen in films like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012), and *The Visit* (2015). Although there has been a change in the way psychological disorders are portrayed in films, psychological disorders are still being inaccurately represented which reinforces harmful stigmas that are presented to the world through the films.

A study found “77% of psychiatric patients depicted on television are violent, compared to less than 3% of patients in reality” (Conway, 55). The entertainment industry has targeted and pried on psychological disorders because of the great profit return those movies generate. Who is to blame? The entertainment industry for creating misleading films and misrepresenting psychological disorders, or society for encouraging the entertainment industry to make this type of content by continuously paying to watch a stigmatized version of what psychological disorders look like?

The exploitation of psychological disorders through films has led to the continuation of stigmatization towards psychological disorders. The research presented in the article, “‘He Acted like a Crazy Person’: Exploring the Influence of College Students’ Recall of Stereotypic Media Representations of Mental Illness,” by Jessie Quintero Johnson and Julius Riles, exemplify the retained stereotypes from depictions of psychological disorders in the media. The researchers express that the media presents “only the most severe illnesses, like schizophrenia and bipolar disorders” because they can make dramatic headlines due to their violent stigmatization (Quintero et al., 147).

Our feelings toward groups of people, in this case people with psychological disorders, is greatly influenced by films (Quintero et al., 147). Stigmatized depictions of psychological disorders are used in films and watched repeatedly by people all over the world. Seeing these depictions in various movies reinforces the stigma and makes it increasingly harder to break away from that stigmatization of psychological disorders. A study found that people exposed to stereotypes around people with psychological disorders are 10 to 20 times more likely to attribute mental illness as the reason an incident occurred (Chan et al., 255). This supports the idea that the portrayal of stereotypes of psychological disorders in film impact the way people view and treat people with psychological disorders.

The stigmatization of psychological disorders starts before the entertainment industry, it starts at home and at schools where children spend most of their time. Public stigma is when “others agree with stereotypes, react emotionally and withhold opportunity,” whereas self-stigma means a “person with health condition internalizes stereotypes and diminishes sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy leading to why try effect” (Corrigan, 132). Mental health was once a taboo topic, in recent years there has been an increased awareness and openness to talk about

mental health. If that open space is never offered there is already an implication that mental health is not important it does not need to be discussed, which is not the case, hence why there are big mental health campaigns all over social media (Lindow et al., 100).

Our perception of things starts at an early age, young children do not have social media, they do not see or understand the mental health crisis the United States is going through (Bridley & Daffin, 2020). Psychological disorders have no age restrictions, therefore they need to be discussed at the earliest point that children can understand them, because it is possible that a child is struggling with a psychological disorder and does not even know what psychological disorders are, so they do not know how to ask for help.

Stereotypes are harmful for the person being stereotyped, and for the family members and friends of the person. Stereotypes ostracize people with psychological disorders including members related to them (Corrigan, 132). A study found that many people have microaggressions about psychological disorders that they may not even know they have (Corrigan, 132). This makes it difficult to isolate and remove stereotypes when the stereotypes are happening subconsciously.

Youth Aware of Mental Health is “a promising, universal, school-based mental health promotion/suicide primary prevention intervention for adolescents” (Lindow et al., 101). The researchers did a study on the acceptance of Youth Aware of Mental Health in schools. They found that the Youth Aware of Mental Health intervention “improved mental health literacy, and decreased stigma at 3-month follow-up” (Lindow et al., 105). This proves that stigmas change with the environment, in schools where mental health awareness is talked about within the classroom, stigmatization is low. On the contrary, in schools where mental health awareness is not discussed, the stigmatization of psychological disorders is going to be higher. The higher

stigmatization paired with the reinforcement of the stigma through films is what keeps the stigma alive.

It is the case that most people do not know anyone with a psychological disorder, so their first experience with seeing a psychological disorder is in a movie (Kondo, 250). With that being said, the entertainment industry has some form of responsibility to provide a realistic representation of psychological disorders. The movie *A Beautiful Mind* was produced in 2001 and was one of the earlier movies that made a great attempt at accurately portraying psychological disorders, specifically schizophrenia for this movie.

The movie *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) produced by Brian Grazer, and Ron Howard is based on a true story. John Nash an extraordinarily intelligent mathematician is in college and has undiagnosed schizophrenia. The movie transports the viewer into the mind of John Nash. For the first half of the movie you believe, just as much as John Nash does, that he is working for the Department of Defense for the U.S. Government under agent William Parcher and that he had a college roommate named Charles Herman who now has a niece named Marcee (Grazer & Howard, 2001). No one in John Nash's family, including John Nash, knew he had schizophrenia. Even his wife believed the reasoning he gave as to why she could not meet his college roommate and why he could not discuss his work (Grazer & Howard, 2001). John Nash did not get the help he needed until years after his schizophrenia symptoms appeared. This was because he believed his delusions were real and was able to convince his loved ones the same thing. No one saw the signs of his psychological disorder.

Unfortunately, this is common for people with psychological disorders to go undiagnosed for an extended period of time (Bridley & Daffin, 2020). This is where the movie portrayed an accurate representation of psychological diagnosis as well as family intervention. Family

intervention is one of the most effective treatments in managing schizophrenia symptoms and was well used in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) (Bridley & Daffin, 2020). John Nash was able to come to terms with his diagnosis through family intervention because he felt supported by his wife. Part of the reason John Nash was able to successfully stay off his medication was because he had a family intervention in which he saw how scared his wife was after him almost drowning their baby (Grazer & Howard, 2001). This intervention was the first time he was able to decipher between his hallucinations and reality, because he knew he needed to live in reality for his wife and the baby's sake.

Another movie that accurately portrayed the symptoms of a psychological disorder is *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012). This movie is about a man, Pat, who has bipolar disorder and is trying to win back his ex-wife, Nikki, and a woman, Tiffany, who has borderline personality disorder (Gigliotti, 2012). A diagnosis of bipolar disorder consists of the individual experiencing “an episode of mania or hypomania that can alternate with periods of depression” (Bridley & Daffin, 2020).

In the movie *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012), bipolar disorder is illustrated through hyper fixation, lack of a filter, and aggression. The authors of the *Abnormal Psychology* textbook, Bridley and Daffin, emphasize the drastic change in mood from mania to depression, whereas the movie emphasizes the rash decision making and the obsession with an idea or thought. Like how Pat was fixated on finding his wedding video in the middle of the night and tore apart his attic and woke up his parents looking for it. When he could not find his wedding video he started to get really frustrated because his fixation was not being fulfilled which made him angry and hostile (Russell, 2012). This movie has one of the most accurate depictions of bipolar disorder in films.

Pat experiences several manic episodes throughout the movie followed by a depressive episode which is accurate with what bipolar episodes look like (Quintero et al., 161). This movie also accurately portrayed the impulse-control disorder that most mood disorder patients experience (Bridley & Daffin, 2020). During manic episodes patients have reported engaging in risky sexual interactions similar to the ones *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) alluded Tiffany had engaged in (Bridley & Daffin, 2020).

In the movie, *Silver Lining Playbook* (2012), Pat's bipolar disorder was being treated with medication and therapy. He was originally in a psychiatric hospital but was allowed to be released to live with his parents if he went to therapy once a week. The treatments portrayed in *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) are accurate to how a patient with bipolar disorder would be treated. Both methods of treatment have been proved to be the best ways to treat patients with bipolar disorder (Bridley & Daffin, 2020).

The horror movie, *The Visit* (2015), had a lot of negative stigmatizations toward schizophrenic patients, but the one thing the producers did get right was the universal want for a family. *The Visit*, produced by Shyamalan in 2015, is about two kids who have never met their grandparents before, and they go to stay with them for the summer. The children find out later in the movie, the people they thought were their grandparents are schizophrenic patients from the hospital their real grandparents worked at (Shyamalan, 2015). The two schizophrenic patients that were posing to be the kids grandparents killed the kids' real grandparents at the hospital to escape and planned to trick the kids into staying with them so that they could pretend to have a family for a while and then kill the kids as well. The director of the movie *The Visit* (2015), M. Night Shyamalan uses schizophrenia as a twist at the end of his horror movie.

Having a psychological disorder or not having one does not change the innate want for a family. In *The Visit* the schizophrenic patients murdered to fulfill their longing for a family (Shyamalan, 2015). The reasoning behind the action does not permit the action, but it is the only part in the whole movie where the schizophrenic patients are given some form of human attribute. The reasoning may have even made the viewers feel sorry for the schizophrenic patients for a second in a twisted way.

The entertainment industry does not always portray psychological disorders this accurately. They often do psychological disorders an injustice in films and reinforce the negative stigmas behind these disorders. Looking again at the movie *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) there are a few inaccuracies and harmful stigmas being portrayed. Some inaccuracies include the visual hallucinations John Nash sees as well as the tactical hallucinations. John Nash's hallucinations included visually seeing people and physically feeling them, like when he hugged Marcee (Grazer & Howard, 2001).

These hallucinations, although possible, are rare with only 15 percent of diagnosed schizophrenia patients reporting visual hallucinations and even less reporting tactical hallucinations at only five percent of patients (Bridley & Daffin, 2020). Half of diagnosed schizophrenic patient's report hearing auditory hallucinations and may see shadows or blurs of movement but cannot see the face and body of a person, as John Nash was able to (Bridley & Daffin, 2020). In this case the entertainment industry has used psychological disorders to their benefit by representing a small group of schizophrenic patients to make the psychological disorder as entertaining as possible.

The stigmatization behind taking medication being a sign of weakness was expressed in the movie *A Beautiful Mind* (Grazer & Howard, 2001). John Nash was put on medication to stop

his hallucinations and delusions, but he did not want to continue taking his medication because he believed it was changing him (Grazer & Howard, 2001). This is quite common with schizophrenic patients as well as bipolar patients which is why psychopharmacological treatment is often implemented so that if the pharmaceutical treatment ends the psychological treatment can provide additional support (Bridley & Daffin, 2020). The permanent termination of pharmaceutical treatment can prove to be dangerous to both the individual and those around them, as seen in the movie when John Nash thought Charles, his hallucination, was watching his baby in the bath, when in reality he had left the baby unattended in the bath (Grazer & Howard, 2001).

Throughout the movie, John Nash was able to recognize that his delusions and hallucinations were not reality and by doing this he learned to control them and did not go back on medication (Grazer & Howard, 2001). Showing John Nash doing well while not on antipsychotic medication reinforces the idea that people with psychological disorders do not need medication to get better rather, they just need to gain “mental toughness.” This is something family members and loved ones of people with psychological disorders often believe and this can be very harmful to the individual with the psychological disorder.

This idea that people with schizophrenia can control their hallucinations causes an unsafe environment for them as they may want to stop taking their medication under the belief that they too can control their hallucinations. It is also possible that the loved ones of people with psychological disorders may use this idea that medication is not necessary to support their theory that people with schizophrenia are able to control their hallucinations. This can also be detrimental to the mental health of those with the psychological disorder as they may feel weak

or incapable since they are not mentally able to control their hallucinations like John Nash was able to do (Grazer & Howard, 2001).

For most if not all schizophrenic patients it is nearly impossible for them to control their hallucinations and decipher between reality and delusion like he did (Bridley & Daffin, 2020). A *Beautiful Mind* (2001) was based on a real person, John Nash, who was able to decipher between delusion and reality. Unfortunately, he is a rare case, and by presenting him as a typical schizophrenic patient the stigma that, medication is for those who are not mentally tough enough to go without, is reinforced.

Another stigmatization of psychological disorders portrayed in films is that psychological disorders can be cured by love. In *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) Pat and Tiffany end up falling in love and in doing so they gain control of their psychological disorders (Gigliotti, 2012). This leaves viewers to believe the stigma that psychological disorders can be cured by love, which is not true. No matter how much you love someone that has a psychological disorder that will not make their disorder go away. Love may give them the support they need to seek psychiatric help, but that is as much as love can do on its own. Using romantic love as a form of treatment is ill-advised in most forms of psychological disorder therapy because people with psychological disorders dating others before they are mentally ready to be on their own can cause damage to the progress they have made, especially in a person with bipolar disorder, as a slight offset like an argument can cause them to go into a deep downward spiral into depression (Bridley & Daffin, 2020). People with psychological disorders dating others who also have psychological disorders would be ill-advised as it could easily become an unhealthy relationship where they before reinforce each other's negative behaviors.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975) was a movie made almost 50 years ago. The stigma in this movie focuses more on evil health care professionals, which correlates to the stigmatizations during the period this movie was made, but there are also current day stigmas that can be found within this movie (Kondo, 250). Like the stigmatization that psychological disorders can be cured by having fun. This movie is about a man, McMurphy, who was convicted of a crime and used an insanity defense to be sent to a psych ward rather than prison (Douglas, 1975). McMurphy goes into the psych ward and disrupts the day-to-day schedule they have and creates chaos. He sneaks the patients out of the hospital and on to a boat to go fishing, he also sneaks people into the hospital in the middle of the night to have a party and causes a raucous over his need to watch the baseball game, all while planning his escape (Douglas, 1975). Once McMurphy showed up and was having fun with all the patients everyone started to make progress with their disorder (Douglas, 1975).

This stigma is an unrealistic representation of psychological disorders. Humor can make a person feel better when they are sad, but depression and other psychological disorders are much deeper than sadness and cannot be fixed by telling a few jokes (Kondo, 252). The progress of psychological disorders is not linear, there are good days and there are bad days, a little bit of fun can only produce short term fixes, not long-term progress (Bridley & Daffin, 2020). A fun time cannot cure someone of their psychological disorder. It is quite the opposite, often what once made someone with a psychological disorder happy no longer does, so engaging in that activity could bring that person into a depressive episode as they realize they no longer feel joy in what they once did (Bridley & Daffin, 2020).

Horror movies containing a psychological disorder have been rising in popularity. As society becomes more concerned with providing a space for people to talk about their disorder,

the entertainment industry jumps at the opportunity to twist it into a horrific character trait in their next movie release. This portrayal reinforces the stigma that people with psychological disorders are crazy or dangerous. Movie producers are moving towards portraying the antagonist as having a psychological disorder because of the recent spike in mental health interest. To appeal to people's current interests and obsessions, they are also reinforcing the negative stigma behind psychological disorders by using the violent 3% of psychiatric patients to base all psychological disorders from in movies (Conway, 55).

The Visit (2015) played into the stigma that people with schizophrenia, and other psychological disorders are dangerous and should be feared. This is one of the most harmful stigmas people with psychological disorders face, because it further outcasts them from the rest of society. Most films containing psychological disorders present the person with the disorder as being violent, as seen in *The Visit* (2015) and many other horror movies. Films like this have not only changed the way people view psychological disorders, but they even made Naomi Kondo, a researcher who has schizophrenia, question whether she had "a secret evil side" (Kondo, 251).

The horror movie, *The Visit* (2015), also portrayed the schizophrenic patients as being organized murderers; they had the grandparents' deaths planned out as well as the kids' deaths (Shyamalan, 2015). Schizophrenia patients struggle with a lack of concentration as well as memory loss (Bridley & Daffin, 2020). Therefore, a person with schizophrenia would not be able to focus long enough to produce such an organized plan.

In the movie, the woman pretending to be their grandmother is seen having delusions, talking to herself, and trying to get her "granddaughter" into the oven, chasing her "granddaughter" under the porch, as well as many other bizarre actions that were supposed to be a representation of her schizophrenia (Shyamalan, 2015). The entertainment industry takes the

small percentage of people with psychological disorders that do become violent and presents that attribute as if all people with psychological disorders are violent (Kondo, 250). The entertainment industry impacts the public's view on psychological disorders as 60% of the surveyed US citizens believe people with schizophrenia have a high risk of violence (Conway, 56).

In the movies analyzed here from the 1970's to the 2010's there has been a movement towards more realistic representations of psychological disorders, excluding horror movies. The stigmatization behind psychological disorders has not gone away, it has adapted through the years to fit the most popular stigma of the most current time period. It is likely that the stigmatization of psychological disorders will continue to be a part of the entertainment industry's means of collecting profit.

Movie producers cannot take all the blame for the stigmatization of psychological disorders, as their motive is to make a movie people want to watch. Portraying the real symptoms of psychological disorders does not make for a good movie, hence why the entertainment industry embellishes a fair amount and chooses to highlight uncommon attributes of psychological disorders. They are not responsible for educating the public on psychological disorders. After all, they make films based on people's pre-existing interests, therefore there is a medium prior to the entertainment industry that is peaking societal interest in psychological disorders.

Although the entertainment industry cannot be blamed for making a profit off the suffering of individuals, they can make an effort to prevent the further belief that these stigmas are true. This can be done through the inclusion of a website or phone number to call if you are experiencing similar symptoms to the psychological disorder described in the film. This would

give those that either knowingly or unknowingly having a psychological disorder an outlet to go to where they can feel heard and include in the community, rather than ostracized in society.

Works Cited

- Bridley, Alexis, and Lee W. Daffin Jr. *Abnormal Psychology*, no. 3, Aug. 2020, pp. 93-273. Pressbooks, <https://opentext.wsu.edu/abnormal-psych/>
- Chan, Ginny, and Philip T. Yanos. "Media Depictions and the Priming of Mental Illness Stigma." *Stigma and Health*, vol. 3, no. 3, Aug. 2018, pp. 253-64. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/sah0000095.supp> (Supplemental).
- Conway, C. "Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know: Psychiatric Illness in Film and Theatre." *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, vol. 33, no. 1, Mar. 2016, pp. 55–59. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/ipm.2015.22>.
- Corrigan, Patrick W. "Defining the Stereotypes of Health Conditions: Methodological and Practical Considerations." *Stigma and Health*, vol. 3, no. 2, May 2018, pp. 131–38. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/sah0000085>.
- Douglas, Michael, et al. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Fantasy Films, 1975.
- Gigliotti, Donna, et al. *Silver Linings Playbook*. The Weinstein Company, 2012.
- Grazer, Brian, and Ron Howard. *A Beautiful Mind*. Universal Pictures, 2001.
- Kondo, Naomi. "Mental Illness in Film." *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, vol. 31, no. 3, Win 2008, pp. 250–52. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/10.2975/31.3.2008.250.252>.
- Lindow, Janet C., et al. "The Youth Aware of Mental Health Intervention: Impact on Help Seeking, Mental Health Knowledge, and Stigma in U.S. Adolescents." *Journal of Adolescent*

Health, vol. 67, no. 1, July 2020, pp. 101-07. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.01.006>.

Quintero Johnson, Jessie M., and Julius Riles. “‘He Acted like a Crazy Person’: Exploring the Influence of College Students’ Recall of Stereotypic Media Representations of Mental Illness.” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, vol. 7, no. 2, Apr. 2018, pp. 146–63. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/ppm0000121>.

Shyamalan, M. Night, et al. *The Visit*. Universal Pictures, 2015.