Media representations of mental illness sociology essay

Mass Media plays an important role in the way society perceive mental illness and the people suffering from it. This essay will examine how mass media in the United Kingdom reports and portrays mental illness and how this representation negatively and positively affects society's perceptions of people suffering with mental illness.

There are various definitions of mental illness. Judge Lawton (1974) describes mental illness as a word without proper definition linked to legal significance. Rogers and Pilgrim (2005) outlined that there is no proper definition brought by the legal framework of psychiatry. This frame emphasise mental disorder as linked to various criminal acts. The meaning of mental illness has become a controversial debate, with some sociologists arguing that it is about illness rather than being social deviance. In British law the notion of mental illness has come from the notion of mental disorders. The British Law does not give a clear definition regarding mental illness. It defines mental illness as a mental disorder as" an impairment of or disturbance in the functioning of the mind or brain resulting from any disability or disorder of the mind or brain" (Department of Health, 2004, p3, 5 cited in Rogers and Pilgrim2005, p8). Baker and Menken, (2001) cited in Rogers and Pilgrim (2005) argue that reject the notion of regarding brain disorders as being a mental illness as misleading people to acquire knowledge about some brain disorders which are not physical ailment.

Mass media refers to a range of media which convey information to the general population including radio, television, newspapers and all forms of publications in global age. Giddens (2006) distinguishes variety forms of mass media such as the press, cinema. In the report by Harris (2004),

Anderson (2003), a British sociologist, claims that there has been an increase in mass media interest on issues relating to community care for the past decade and that there has been a growth of mass media interest on the institutionalisation of people with mental illness. He argues that newspapers have a great influence when reporting violent incidents of people with mental illness. Philo et al (1994) emphasizes that media has an impact on the public view of mental illness as people beliefs are based on their past experiences and judgements.

Mass media has significant role to play in the stigmatisation of people with mental illness. Theoretically, the current mass media give a very bad image to people with mental illness by labelling them as being dangerous, violent and criminals. Cutcliffe and Hannigan (2001, p315) argues that the inappropriate representation of mental illness in mass media increases stigma, harassment and victimisation of individuals by the public. This has led to some theorists like Goffman, (1961) cited in Busfied (2001. p10) to define mental illness as " process of rejection, stigmatisation and social exclusion". Mass media may provoke strong passions which lead to a number of homicide over last forty years (Clutcliffe and Hannigan (2001). They also argue that government policy such as legislation concerning care has no clear provision of the care of people with mental illness in the society. As a result people with mental illness remain institutionalised. According to Anderson (2003, p298) survey shows that there is high incidents of homicides involving a person suffering of mental illness. He claims that mass media is the most powerful form in portraying those incidents. The newspaper report in 1994 of Stephen Laudat' s case who was suffering from

schizrenia is one of the example how media portrays people with mental health. The media identifies him as " killer who should not have gone to jail"(Anderson, 2003, p298).

Anderson claims that newspapers have great influence to the wider society when reporting violent incidents of people with mental illness. Some of the studies and researches carried by some psychiatrics draw the idea that people are strongly influenced by the language the mass media use in reporting incidents of people with mental illness. Apple and Wessley(1988) cited in Cutcliffe and Hannigan (2001) suggest that situations as real have a linkage to the style the information is represented and they become real in their consequences. Mass media represent negative effects of mental illness to the wider society, mainly dominated by episodes of violence (Giddens 2006). Violence can be defined as " a threat or use of force directed against the self or others in which physical harm or death is involved". Harns (2004, p19). He argues that there are imbalances of press coverage of mental health issues reinforcing stigma and disempowering the quality of life to the sufferers. MIND, one of the leading organisation of people with mental disorders in the UK also argues that press coverage such as in the Sun newspaper convey strong messages to the public and give biased information which gives people negative view of people with mental health problems. According to a 1993 survey carried by Scottish Mental Health Working group it has been found that within five categories of mass media," violence to others was 62%, harm to self 13%, sympathetic to others 18%, criticism of accepted definition of mental illness (1%) and comic images 2%" (Cutcliff and Hannigan2001 p316). It can be noted that in the above survey,

violence coverage came up with the highest percentage which significantly means that people's beliefs are based on what the media convey to them.

However, Mackeown and Clancy (1995) cited in Anderson (2003)) emphasize that media have different degree of intensity on people who once have mental illness. Media may provoke strong passions and lead to violence. On the other hand it maybe relative minor information conveyed by media and have only limited relevance to every day life. In addition, Signorielli (1989 and Wahl 1992 cited in Cutcliffe and Hannigan 2001) claims that media labelling people with mental illness as dangerous and violence gives a bad reputation to mentally ill people and reinforces the public view of fear and anxiety (Busfied 2001). The media interpretation of people with mental illness has a strong impact on the general public because of negative reports contribute to different attitudes towards the mental ill (Anderson 2003). Bhugra (1989) believes that mental illness is linked to negative attitudes such a cruel treatment of mentally ill people. Negative attitude which the media portrays encourage pessimistic attitudes to the public. Repper (1997cited in Busfied 2001) outlined three things which some of the public are ignorant in understanding mental illness. For instance, people do not have strong background knowledge of the diagnoses, ignorant of the types of behaviours and emotional attitudes which are acceptable towards people with mental illness. Mass media therefore plays a pivotal role in filling this gap of ignorance and people tend to learn mental health illnesses from reports from the media therefore making them vulnerable to negative reports which emanate from the media.

According to Giddens (2006) there is now a wide variety of mass media in the United Kingdom but newspapers have become one of the biggest forms of media. In fact, newspapers have become a subsequent link between criminality, violence and mental ill health (Ward, 1997 cited in Andrew, 2007). Focusing on the newspapers which are dominating cultural interactive in the United Kingdom in this modern time, research reports it have proved that news reporting in newspapers has strong predominates coverage about mental illness (Busfied, 2001). Essentially, newspapers do not focus on the clear meaning of the undifferentiated terms, such as lunatic , psycho, schizo, mental patient, mental ill, all these meanings become different when general public interpret them (Harris, 2004). Most newspapers report incidents of people with mental illness using terms such as dangerous and violent. Harris (2004) describes the reports in newspapers as a classical institutional trait which has common norms, rules, beliefs, and knowledge and that they all share behavioural patterns on the concept of dangerousness. According to various sociologists the notion of dangerousness is used to characterise situations. This notion of newspapers constructing meanings represent negative attitudes to mental ill people. Busfied (2001, p135) refer dangerous” as harm to self or others”. This dangerousness reveals to the public that mental ill people should stay away from the society. To the society point of view this particularly brings a close link between badness and illness.

Newspapers interpret deviant behaviour, which is a behaviour that people so label. According to (Haralambos and Holborn) 1991, labelling is an “ act of naming, the development of language to confer and fix the meaning of

behaviour and symbolic internationalism and the phenomenology".

Moreover, according to Fulcher and Scott (2007), labelling theory claims that

deviance and conforming result not much from what people do but from how

others respond to those actions, it highlight social responses to mass media

and deviance. Murder is one way that individual is labelled in a negative

rather in a positive way (Anderson, 2003). Apple and Wesley (1988 cited in

Anderson, 2003) cited the Hungerford massacre which outlined the story of

Michael Ryan who committed a horrific homicide but there was no diagnosis

of mental illness. Therefore sometimes people have wrong interpretations of

horrific incidents and assumptions that violent incidents are only done by

people with mental illness and their beliefs are constructed by the language

used by newspapers. This leads to stigmatisation of people with mental

illness and this is a negative social label which changes a person's self

concept and social identity. According to Scheff (1984) stigmatising people

often leads to retrospective labelling which he describes as the interpretation

of someone's past consistent with the present deviance. Retrospective

labelling distorts a person's biography in prejudicial way guided by stigma

than attempt to be fair. In order to reduce and tackle this stigmatising the

Department of Health (1999b) initiated current mental healthcare policy

which works towards promoting health to people with mental illness.

(Anderson, 2003).

Signorielli (1989) pointed out that films are another form of mass media

which is culturally dominated in portraying the public life. Many films give a

negative view of people with mental illness, for example films such as the

Hollywood broadcast some vivid images which reveal negative effects to the

public(Hyler, 1988). In addition, films such as " psycho, (1960), One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975) remained the greatest example in presenting madness (Hyler et al, 1991). The main issue in all these films is mainly based on the experience of mental ill people. Byrne (2000 cited in Anderson, 2003) mentioned some films such as " Shine (1989), Voices (2000) outlined that the synopsis of these films have great consequences to the lives of people with mental illness. For example the film Jack Nicolson's R. P MacMurghy (1970) refused to admission to mental institution as he was not having any problems related to mental illness but later lived in a mental institution. This shows how society's viewpoint can impact on each individual's view. The contemporary films draw people to fear resulting in a change of behaviour towards people with mental illness. Watching films like " Halloween (1978)and Psycho(1960) have horrific themes" which arouse people's anxiety and create fear of people with mental illness because violent actions influence the way people see things (Anderson 2003, p229).

Cutcliffe and Hannigan (2001) argue that films stereotype people with mental illness which in turn contribute to the stigmatisation of people with mental illness. This is supported by Hyler, et al.(1991) who points out that film stereotypes and illness linked to violence and psychiatry and mental illness still dominates synopsis in films. Films present wrong interpretation to the public about mental illness by showing images of violence and dangerous people. Philo, et al (1994) also says that the images of mental health people which the film broadcast and the emotional language seem to have a lot of stereotypes. Therefore, films publications help to give mental illness its shape.

Although there are various forms of media, television is the main worldwide source form of media which produces information mostly in images across different countries, especially in economically developed countries (Cutcliff and Hannigan (2001). Television also broadcast images, dramas, cartoons and international news, presenting clearly mental illness in the context of violence and harm to others. (Anderson, 2003). According to the survey carried out by Glasgow Media Group in Scotland, 1993, it has been found that television is a typical form of mass media which primarily focus most of its programmes on people with mental illness. Furthermore, it has judgemental attitudes which have negative impact towards people with mental health problems and the wider society. In a nutshell, television has great consequences to mentally ill people and draws attention of the wider society to exclude them in social life.

From the above analysis, it is evident that mass media is enormously influential in directing attention towards the relative and somewhat arbitrary nature of dominant definition of mental illness in Britain. There is uniformity in the way mass media represent people with mental illness. Different forms of media have great impact to the public by the way they convey their message to the public. Mass media is therefore misleading people by relating mental illness to violence and dangerousness.