

**Media
misrepresentation of
the relationship
between violence and
mental disorder**



Critically analyse the extent to which the media misrepresents the relationship between violence and mental disorder.

In the following assignment we will discuss the way that media represent mental disorder. Additionally, a brief description of the film *Me, Myself & Irene* will take place in order to understand how the media misrepresent mental disorder. Furthermore, we will try to show the real relationship between violence and mental disorder and thus, how accurate are media portrayals of this mental health problem. Ultimately, we will explain the impact of negative media representation on the mentally ill people and on the public.

Mass media representation of mental disorder is negative and describes mentally ill people as 'monsters'. Media's sovereign depictions of mental health problems appear to emphasize violence, dangerousness and criminality as long as. Hence, this inappropriate representation causes severe stigma, moral panic, ostracism, as well as discrimination and victimization of these individuals this " Poor, unbalanced press coverage of mental health issues fuels stigma and reduces the quality of life for sufferers, says a leading charity" ([www. news. bbc. co. uk](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk)).

Me, Myself & Irene, is a comedy film directed from the Farrelly brothers and was released in U. K on September 22, 2000. The plot of the movie is about a mentally ill man, Charlie Baileygates, who is passive and generally peaceful. He has 'split' personality and thus his alter ego (Hank) is aggressive, foul-mouthed and violent.

Charlie has been diagnosed with delusional schizophrenia with involuntary narcissistic rage, and whenever Charlie does not take his medication, Hank takes his place causing several problems because of his turbulent mental state. His behaviour becomes obscene as he defecates on a neighbour's lawn and suckles from a stranger's breast.

This uncontrolled rage makes Hank to make fun of one man with albinism who explains that he killed his entire family but was released early just to make room for psychos. Both Charlie (good) and Hank (evil) try to protect Irene from a gang of corrupt cops who want her dead. Menacing Hank insults and punches nearly everyone he encounters.

The film raised many dilemmas about its inappropriate presentation of mental health problems, since it is argued that it makes fun of mentally ill people and perpetuates ugly stigmas about mental illness. *Me, Myself & Irene* is a perfect example on how the media link violence and mental disorder, and as Thornicroft (2006) claims, schizophrenia is often linked to violence in films and media. This link can be seen in *My, Myself and Irene*, when 'Hank' assaults a group of people.

These so-called 'psycho media' (www.mentalhealthstigma.com), through biased news, stereotype mental health problems and lead to the implied conclusion that all mentally ill people are violent and deranged (Hank starts to drown a young girl who has insulted him). This stereotype, in turn, is argued to be true by the public, since the media are powerful and so pervasive in terms of their ability to create views (Jewkes, 2004).

Furthermore, the public misconception about mental health is also fueled by the prejudicial language within such movies, since negative values towards mentally ill people are often attached (Irene apologises all the time for Hanks behaviour, explaining that he is a 'schizo').

Moreover, it is believed that an intentional exclusion is also obvious. This is to say, that even though the media can disprove this harmful stereotype, yet it is well hidden and concealed. To make matters worse, the media make some sort of misleading generalization since an unrepresentative population (violent mentally ill) is cited as a whole. However, this is unrealistic and as Wahl claims "the great majority of people who are currently disordered...are not violent" (Wahl, 1997: 80).

Finally the media persuade the public to agree that mentally ill people are violent, through emotions (in our case via humour-laugh) and not through logic or facts. ([www. mentalhealthstigma. com](http://www.mentalhealthstigma.com))

Concisely, these, Psycho Media, as explained, employ psycho movie stereotypes and cleverly equate depraved and demented movie characters like Hank as accurate depictions of the mentally ill people. Thus, whenever an article about mental health is reported in the news the media will link the story to violence ([www. mentalhealthstigma. com](http://www.mentalhealthstigma.com)).

However, it is a fact that people collect most of the information from the television, newspapers and radio and as Thornicroft supports "the majority of people gather what they know about mental illnesses either from personal experience and contact with people with such conditions, or from the mass media" (Thornicroft, 2007).

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According to what it was observed by the film *My, Myself & Irene*, Hank unpredictably assaulted whoever was in front of him, making abnormal movements and behaving oddly (especially during the personality change from good Charlie to villain Hank). Such representations, it is assumed that force people to misunderstand mental disorder, and this misrepresentation appears to play a significant role in shaping and sustaining what mental illness means in our culture (Tummey, Turner 2008: 191).

Consequently, after careful consideration of the above facts and several personal life experiences with mentally ill people, it is believed that mass media portrayals of mental disorder are in the vast majority inaccurate, inappropriate, unfavourable and harmful to mentally ill people (Byrne, 2000). Such demeaning attitudes, which can affect significant undesirable consequences, can be seen while reading a newspaper, watching television or a movie to the cinema (Tummey, R., Turner, T, 2008: 197).

Mass media treat mental disorder as an object of ridicule, using psychiatric terminology inaccurately, and to overuse jargon-disrespectful terms for mental illness (Thorncroft, 2007). One clear example of inaccurate terminology is Charlie's diagnosis with delusory schizophrenia with involuntary narcissistic rage.

According to that, Britain's two largest mental health charities, Mind and National Schizophrenia Fellowship, have joined with the Royal College of Psychiatrists and advised the public that " people affected by schizophrenia don't switch from gentle to mental, as the billboard advertisements say, but are more often withdrawn.

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In fact, split personality is a totally different condition; it is a dissociative disorder rather than a psychotic illness". Furthermore, they argued that the behaviour portrayed in the film, has nothing to do with schizophrenia (Baron-Faust, 2000).

Comedy portrayals tend to depict mental illnesses as primarily involving little more than specific oddities that the individuals manifest repetitively. This notion of mental disorder as a humorous oddity is conveyed in several movies (American Psycho and so forth), whatever their titles, continuously find ways to present mental illnesses as laughable and ridiculous. The fact that the film mentioned above has a funny plot which involves violence, mental health, beautiful girls and bad guys hunting good guys, succeeds to attract viewer's attention and interest (Wahl, 1997). This can be seen in our case example, when for instance Charlie is trying to make Hank go away.

Media images are emotionally arousing, as they do not only provide information, but they also manipulate emotions in a deliberate, skillful and effective way. Thus, it is believed that it is very important to be understood that movies which are not about mental illnesses (our movie is categorized as comedy), they make viewers to merely absorb what they see, and therefore reinforce their biases and already inaccurate views, without being particularly aware that they are learning about mental illness. In addition to this, according to Wahl (1997) "Comedies may be mindless, but that does not mean it is not affecting minds".

Society's lack of knowledge, negative attitude and discriminatory behaviour is one of the central paradoxes, since nowadays up to half of all adults will

be diagnosed with mental disorder in their lifetime. Furthermore, up to three-quarters of adult population know someone directly who has mental disorder, and yet people act as if nobody knows anything (Thornicroft, 2006). Thus, it is very complex to understand why people who still feel threatened by it, allow stigma to thrive.

Mental disorder misrepresentation by the media also poses significant limitations in the initiatives to normalize mental health services within the community and therefore reduce harmful stigma. According to that, many mentally ill people face prejudice and severe discrimination when happens to live next to ' healthy' people "...Just because I have a mental health problem, I am now shunned, my life made even more difficult to live".

Given that, it is very important to be mentioned that Maria is a woman whose only crime is to live in an area in which a hostel for people with mental health problems is planned" (Thornicroft-Shunned-2006).

Public's perception of mental illness is one of fear and paranoia, bordering on mass media as they often use words such as ' nutter', ' psycho' and ' schizo'. This can be seen in the film Me, Myself & Irene, when Irene used to apology for Hanks behaviour, saying that he is a ' schizo'.

Equally important to be mentioned is that during the movie, a misrepresentation of mental disorder took place on Charlie/Hank but also there was a pervasive and persistent pattern to degrade mental disorder through Whiteys portrayal that according to the plot, have killed his entire family.

As mentioned before, everyday people are learning, from everyday sources, concerning mental illnesses and it appears unfortunate that the majority of those people learn about mental illness from what they see and hear in the mass media (Wahl, 1997: 88).

However, even if the mass media are not wholly to blame for negative perceptions, yet every time programmes, articles or film portrays a stereotype they fail to clear up a misunderstanding about mental disorder and thus, this helps to perpetuate the myths.

The following extract taken from the book *Media madness: public images of mental illness*, is a clear illustration of how the fearful mass media with the bold headlines tend to misrepresent mental disorder. The case is about a 30 year old woman who entered an elementary school in Winnetka, Illinois in May 1988 and shot a number of children (Wahl, 1997: 27).

“.. Time’s May 30, 1988, headline introducing the story of this tragic incident was ‘ One Lunatic, Three Guns’. The event was truly tragic, and it is likely that mental illness was a contributing factor in the woman’s actions.

Referring to the mentally ill person involved as a ‘ lunatic’, however, was both unnecessary (Newsweek’s article on the same incident was titled simply ‘ I Have Hurt Some Children: Nightmare in Winnetka’) and inconsistent with standards applied to other groups (Wahl, 1997: 27).

If the Winnetka school killing had been committed by someone in a wheelchair, it is unlikely that the Time’s headline would have read ‘ One Cripple, Three Guns’. If the incident had involved a black woman, the

headline would not have proclaimed ‘ One Nigger, Three Guns’. There seems
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not to be the same hesitancy about using similarly disrespectful terms in referring to people with mental illnesses...” (Wahl, 1997: 27). Given that example, it is obvious that the mass media tend to misrepresent mental illness with disrespectful patterns, fueling public fear and letting stigma to thrive.

Stigma, in ancient Greece was bodily sign for those who were different. Stigmata were cut and burnt onto these different people (most of the time slaves) bodies to mark them as different from the rest population (www.rcpsych.ac.uk). However, nowadays, mentally ill people are no longer physically mutilated, but still depreciation and hostile attitudes towards them can be just as hurtful to them.

Individuals with mental health problems are stereotyped and stigmatized through the media as mad and violent, and thus this stigma causes serious obstacles in their life. Shame, blame and secrecy are taking place as they are the “black sheep of the family”. Mentally ill people experience severe stigma, discrimination, social exclusion and thus, isolation (Wahl, 1999: 59).

Media represents mentally disordered as individuals dangerous to the public, strange and unpredictable like Hank (after all, who would want to live next to somebody who parks a car inside a shop and fights a cow?). But, the relationship between violence and mental disorder is not what the mass media simply represents. It is a complex matter that needs further consideration and critical thinking. Thus, in the following paragraphs it will be made an attempt in order to understand the real relationship between mental disorder and violence.

Having said that the representation of a phenomenon by the media reflect the frame in which a phenomenon is socially placed, it is considered essential at this point to mention that it is much more likely for people to become victimized from ‘ healthy’ offenders than becoming a victim from a mentally disordered individual (Friedman, 2006).

The depiction of the mentally ill individual as violent, unanticipated, dangerous and potential criminal appears to be extremely “ popular” in the media’s interest. Furthermore, in the connection between mental illness and violence, schizophrenia possesses a prominent place, mainly because of its complexity.

According to this, researches in Great Britain shows that the frame of violence outclasses against other approaches in proportion 4: 1 and the individuals with mental illness almost always are presented with negative way, as violent, murderers or rapists, or, in the better case, as objects of sneer (Wahl, 1997).

Additionally, and as empirical evidence show us, actually, the percentage of crimes of violence that has been committed by individuals with mental disturbance does not abstain perceptibly from what is attributed to the general population) and the majority of acts of violence that are committed by mental patients are located in cases of incomplete therapeutic confrontation or even parallel use of substances (Peay, 2007).

However, this study, and most of the studies conducted until recently, have focused on the rates of violence among people with mental disorder, based

on those who were hospitalized (inpatients) or on rates of mentally ill which were arrested, convicted or incarcerated for violent crimes.

For example, one national survey showed that the lifetime risk of schizophrenia was 5% among people convicted for homicide, a prevalence that is much higher than any published rate of schizophrenia in the general population (suggesting the relationship between schizophrenia and homicide) (Friedman, 2006)

These studies, however, have many limitations as they only refer to individuals who were arrested, hospitalized or incarcerated which are by definition more likely to be violent or very ill and thus are not accurate representative of mentally ill in the general population.

However, according to a study conducted by NIMH Epidemiology Catchment Area it was found that mentally ill patients suffering from serious mental disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or major depression were two to three times as likely as “ healthy” people to be assaultive (Friedman, 2006). Furthermore, NIMH noted that not all mental illnesses are linked to violence.

For example, anxiety disorders do not increase the risk of violence. However, although the overwhelming majority of mentally ill with major depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder do not produce criminal behaviour, the presence of such disorders is significantly linked to an increased risk of violence.

Furthermore, this study which had representative sample of 17. 803 subjects, showed that people with no mental health problems who abuse alcohol and drugs are seven times as likely to report a violent behaviour as those without substance abuse whereas, mentally ill with substance abuse compounds the increased risk of violence (alcohol and substance abuse far outweigh mental disorder in contributing violence) (Friedman, 2006).

Given that, it is well understood that severe mental disorder links to violence when alcohol consumption takes place (Tummey, R., Turner, T, 2008: 191). This is to say, that mental disorder without alcohol consumption is not in itself violent. Hence, this correlation between mental health problems and violence is not an idle subject and thus, needs further consideration.

As a result, the public should adopt the idea that most people who are violent are not mentally ill, and most people who are mentally ill are not violent. A look at the broader picture is essential, thus even though the media represents dramatic statistics in order to underscore their cases, mass media consumers should know that serious mental illness is quite rare and actually contributes little to the overall rate of violence in the general population (Friedman, 2006).

Furthermore, it is crucial for us to understand that, most of people who are violent do not suffer from mental illnesses. More specifically, mentally ill are more likely to be the victims, rather than the perpetrators of violence “ current research shows that people with major mental illness are 2. 5 times more likely to be the victims of violence than other members of society” (<http://www.cmha.ca>).

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Moreover, a 1996 Health Canada review of scientific articles found that the strongest predictor of violence and criminal behaviour is not major to mental illness, but past history of violence and criminality (<http://www.cmha.ca>).

To conclude, and as mentioned before, mental disorder plays no part in the majority of violent crimes committed in our society. However, mentally ill people who live in a stressful, unpredictable environment with little family or community support may be at risk high risk of becoming violent (in relation to our case, Charlie/Hank was away from his family and chased across the country by corrupt cops).

However, mental disorder misrepresentation by the media continues and it is not hard to understand why. Pamela Kalbfleisch claims, that "...nothing sells like an insane, unpredictable, undetected, glory killer on the loose who has caused a great deal of pain and anguish to the friends and relatives of the victim" (Wahl, 1997).

To the question why are people with mental disorder depicted consistently from the media in such inaccurate and inappropriate way (dangerous, different) the answer would be for profit. There is no question that mass media selection of what to present to the public is based on financial factors. Mass media operate for profit and wants to fulfill the public's thirst and excitement for violence related to mental disorder, and thus should present what the public will buy (Wahl, 1997: 110).

Hence, it was considered essential for the films trailer to show Charlie explaining that he suffers from delusionary schizophrenia with involuntary narcissistic rage so that, attract viewers attention.

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Nevertheless, mental disorder produces profits (the film grossed \$83 million in the USA according to The Guardian, July 28, 2000), (<http://pb.rcpsych.org>). Phenomena that are dramatic and puzzling have always been attractive to the public. Thus, what is more buy-able than a 'funny' and unpredicted character acting like 'mad'.

Mental illness is therefore, transformed into madness, and madness related to fun is even more 'fascinating'. Media representation of serious mental disorder, challenge public's appetite for arousal and excitement as stories about violent crime linked to mental illness provide titillation (Wahl, 1997: 111).

However, the most important thing during the movie is that there was an inappropriate and inaccurate depiction that whenever a mentally ill individual does not take the medication becomes villain (Hank wanted to fight a 10-year-old boy, he vanished a cow, almost drowned a young girl). Thus, this misrepresentation contains an explicit message that the public needs vigilant protection from mental patients.

Consequently, when viewers see such misrepresentation of mental disorder taking place, they become fearful that those 'different' people are highly likely to cause physical harm to other people. In other words, this pervasive portray of mentally ill as violent and extremely dangerous, will only lead media consumers to a general belief that mentally ill individuals will attack and therefore harm their community. Such belief will, in turn, create moral panic, and fear in the presence of mentally ill, thereby excluding and

weakening the patient's belief in his ability to change (self-efficacy) (Lloyd, 2010: 69)

After all, and as previously expressed, who would feel safe next to somebody who parks a car inside a shop? According to this, and as many believe that homelessness is closely related to mental disorder, moral panic lead to a random attack on a homeless man with schizophrenia in Toronto June 4, 2000 "...Fillmore was attacked as he lay sleeping in a bus shelter last June: he was stabbed and bled to death" (<http://pb.rcpsych.org>).

Just imagine that once patients leave psychiatric hospitals and therefore eager for support and acceptance, are instead treated with suspicion and fear. This misrepresentation will fuel panic and increase the prejudice and fear (Tummey, R., Turner, T, 2008: 10), and will make people to cross the street or exit buses or move away when they happen to be next of mentally ill.

Moreover, it is highly likely that people who are persuaded by the media to ignore and fear of mentally ill, to become mentally ill. This, in turn, via self-fulfilling prophecy will lead them to self-loathing as they now know that they have become violent, dangerous and so forth (Wahl, 1999: 139).

Additionally, mentally ill are bombarded with unfavourable information about them and therefore perceived as 'threat' (self-stigma) and thus, these attitudes towards them have devastating effect on their relationships, employment, housing and social functioning (Lloyd, 2010: 75).

The discrimination and stigma, excludes them from any social activity and the issue of employment as well (<http://bjp.rcpsych.org>). According to this, it is believed that the most important step to recovery is to work, because of employment offers a social network, route out of poverty (Lloyd, 2010: 75).

To conclude, I would like to mention that this misrepresentation of mental disorder, inevitable generates public fear, exclusion and therefore fragmentation among the communities. Furthermore, I have concluded that the mass media fuel public fear by generalizing all mental illnesses and stereotyping its patients as 'different'. Hence, that stigma and the discrimination against mentally ill are both common and severe.

Ultimately, I suggest that all the incorrect beliefs of previous generations should not be passing on to new. The stigmatizing and discriminating attitudes towards mentally ill people have been going on for a long time and it is time to stop as I am a believer that the way our society behaves the mentally ill, is not only an issue of mental health care but human rights issue. According to this, I would like to conclude with the following words written by a relative of one mentally ill patient.

“ For me stigma means fear, resulting in a lack of confidence. Stigma is loss, resulting in unresolved mourning issues. Stigma is not having access to resources... Stigma is being invisible or being reviled, resulting in conflict. Stigma is lowered family esteem and intense shame, resulting in decreased self-worth. Stigma is secrecy... Stigma is anger, resulting in distance. Most importantly, stigma is hopelessness, resulting in helplessness.” (<http://apt.rcpsych.org>).

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