

# Representation of mental health problems in the media



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Media tends to use harsh words such as 'psycho' and 'maniac' as the headline when referring to people with mental health problem, which can influence the public perception. Previous research suggests that there is a strong link between negative portrayal of mental health and public attitude towards people with those conditions (Rose, 1998). This essay, aims to examine negative representation of mental health problems in the media. It will be based on qualitative research method and will take a view of thematic analysis of the sun newspaper. Result indicated that media tends to focus on the negative news as it is more news worthy, exaggerate and generalising people with mental health problems. Recommendations suggested; media should stick to facts in relation to mental health and should stop producing negative information in this field.

## **Introduction and aims**

Data from 2010 survey by the UK Office of National Statistics showed that 1 in 6 adult experience at least one diagnosable mental health problem at any given time and that severity will vary from mild anxiety to conditions such as bipolar disorder (<http://www.guardian.co.uk>). Previous studies in this area found that people perception were influenced by media negative representation of mental health disorders (Rose, 1998), this was supported by Philo (1993) who found that public attitude towards crime and mental health was based on what was presented in the media. Media representation of mental health problems tends to be shadowed with negative comments and always emphasises on the link between people with mental health and violent crimes.

A study by Cutcliffe and Hannigan (2001) examined media reporting of people with mental health problems and concluded that media stories tend to be focused on 'violence', 'dangerousness' and 'criminality' toward others in relation to a person with a mental illness. Anderson (2003) also suggests that the media only focus on reporting negative events such as murder committed by those with mental health problems more than the awareness of mental health. Yet there is evidence that people with mental health problems do not commit more crimes than the rest of the population. According to Large et al (2008) study on homicides due to mental health between 1950-2000, they suggested that only a small proportion of people with mental health do commit violent crimes compared to those with no mental health problems. The relationship between mental health problems and violent crimes are mostly linked to alcohol and substance abuse and not just mental health condition. Although a small proportion of people with mental health problems tends to be violent, the majority are victims of violent attacks and the media seems to forget to produce this (www.guardian.co.uk).

Furthermore, Edney (2004) argues that even though media always features stories relating to mental health, those stories tend to be exaggerated and negative in tone. Anderson (2003) claimed that media stories which portray people with mental health negatively tend to gain more publicity than those which don't. The purpose of this essay is to examine the impact of portraying people with mental health negatively in the media which will be achieved by thematically analysing an article from the Sun newspaper. Studies such as that

of Stuart (2006) claimed that, media negative presentation on mental health does have a significant effect on people with mental health problems.

## **Analytic approach**

Article on coverage story of Raoul moat 37 was chosen from the sun newspaper from the internet dated (10th July, 2010), who shoot his ex-lover through the window of her house and killed her then boyfriend while trying to protect her as well as living a police officer blind after gunning him down while on duty. Before going on a run for almost a week and turning the gun on himself after a police standoff. The sampling method used was probability sampling. Thematic analysis was employed In order to explore how people with mental health problems are portrayed by the media.

Thematic analysis procedure involves different stages. First stage involved; Students being instructed to develop a research question which related to the representation of mental health illness. Stage two; students had to read the article which was based on a story of Raoul Moat in order to be familiar with the data. Stage three; here students had to transcribe data from the article into text stage four is coding for themes; this involves organizing words which relate to similar topics into categories which requires reading text and note down words of interest for the chosen research question, Text needs to be examined closely, line by line. Stage five includes; Text being re-examined to see if all the information is relevant to themes. The final stage is reporting each theme by writing its description and illustrating it with a few quotations from the original text. This will be covered in the findings section. (Boyatzis, 1998).

## Findings and discussion

The following themes were identified within the text.

Theme 1: Paranoid about the cops.

Moat hated the police whom he called animals, " He hated the police.... called them pigs". He believed that they had something against him due to the amount of time he had been stopped before going to prison, " They harassed him on the outside by pulling him over in his car every five minutes for no reason". More crucially, having being dumped over the phone by his then lover while serving time in prison for attacking a relative left him convinced that she had left him for a cop. " he was fixated on the other man being a police officer..... She's dumped me for a fucking pig".

Theme 2: Emotional meltdown.

Prior to calling Samantha from the prison phone booth, moat was in good mood " he was fine before..... he said he was going to ring Samantha". But after making that call he came back a different person, the colour of his skin had changed to red and he was in tears. " He completely changed...His neck and face had turned red". " He was crying like a baby". Moat took all the feeling of being rejected on the fellow prisoners ' fuck off scam- get out of my face'. " he went mental one time because Eric had stuck out the place".

The articles looked at referred to mental health in general and exaggerate on the actual information. Most of the information reported was descriptive e. g. media called him " psycho" even though there was no evidence to support that he was suffering from psychosis. These articles were published by

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journalist who may have little or no background knowledge on mental health, they are business driven and therefore look for news worth in order to sell the papers instead of focusing on the actual facts.

Media create a label for people with mental health problems such as mentally ill, and psycho.

## **Character of information**

Most publications relating to mental health problems tend to be exaggerated. Media use one particular incidence (e. g. how many had mental health) to generalise everyone with mental health condition.

Most of the information the media report tends to be descriptive (e. g. how many person with mental illness has committed murder). Very little space is devoted to explanatory information (example, about causes or symptoms of mental illnesses)

recommendations for good practice when reporting on violent crime stories which may be linked to mental illness: Media should Avoid using offensive words like 'psycho' and 'nutter', be certain about the information they report instead of speculating news. They should make it clear to the reader that only a very few people with mental health problems are violent.

## **Conclusions**

Publications in media relating to people with mental health problems are negatively which paints a picture of people with mental health problems as dangerous criminals which can lead them being labelled and stereotypes with society.

In order to remove this stigma, journalists should be provided with some guidelines where they can find information on mental health problems

In general media coverage of mental health problems tends to be negative, Media uses harsh words such as 'crazed', 'maniac' or 'monster' to refer to people with mental health problems. Specific conditions were less likely to be mentioned in headlines than general references like 'mental illness'.

Media representation of mental health tends to be more sensational headlines than sensational stories.