

Popular Culture and Psychiatry: Friends or Foes?

Popular culture embodies the ideas, perspective and attitudes of the masses. It exists in a symbiotic relationship with widely disseminated forms of media such as broadcast, film, print, and in more recent years, mobile phone content and the internet. In fact, mass media and popular culture may be conceptualised as both arising from and creating each other (Anderson 2003).

Psychiatry, on the other hand, is a mysterious silent cousin to popular culture. Outside of common mass media portrayals of a distorted, sensationalized version of psychiatry, there appears to be little interaction between psychiatry and popular culture (Hopson 2014). Is this distant relationship with popular culture necessarily harmful to psychiatry? Or is it not only natural but also helpful for the disparate to maintain distance? Let us springboard our discussion with an examination of the portrayal of psychiatry in popular culture before moving to evaluate their relationship.

Psychiatry's Portrayal in Popular Culture: A Brief Journey Through the Last Half a Century

To understand the portrayal of psychiatry in popular culture today, it is perhaps instructive to return to one of the most influential films in the past half-century, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Cuckoo's). The 1965 book by Ken Kesey and cult classic film (1975) pitted psychiatric institutions against the individual patient in a satire on the state of psychiatry at the time. In an unforgettable scene in the movie, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) was applied to the protagonist as punishment for anti-authoritarian behaviour and a metaphor for the repression of humanist values. Although, or perhaps because, the portrayal was highly dramatized and poorly representative of actual ECT, Cuckoo's has been hailed the 'biggest beast in the celluloid ECT jungle' (McDonald & Walter 2009, p. 202), casting a negative shadow on ECT as a form of treatment even to this day. As Stuart (2006, p. 100) observes, the 'early images of forced confinement, electroshock and psychosurgery horrified audiences and cast serious and lasting doubts upon the nature of psychiatric treatments and the motivation of psychiatric professionals.'

A guiding rule of cinema, 'film begets film', describes the tendency for each new film to derive from successful genres and stereotypes of previous films (Byrne 2009, p. 287). Several decades after Cuckoo's, antiquated portrayals of substandard psychiatric care persist in contemporary hits such as *12 Monkeys* (1995), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) and *Shutter Island* (2010); the inaccurate and largely negative dramatizations of ECT continue in a vast majority of movie and television depictions (Sienaert

2016); and characterizations of psychiatrists as omniscient devils (*The Silence of the Lambs* 1991), unethically self-serving clinicians (*Side Effects* 2013) or at best, ineffectual fools (*Groundhog Day* 1993) perpetuate the stigmatization of psychiatrists (Hopson 2014).

The negative portrayal of psychiatry in film continues to be paralleled in the news and entertainment media (Sartorius 2004), and more recently the Internet. In a descriptive study, Gordon, Miller & Collins (2015) found that the representation of 'psychiatry' as a medical discipline on YouTube was predominantly and consistently negative over two years (2012-2014). While the influence of such relatively new social media representations on real-world attitudes and behaviours remains to be determined, the impact of other traditional forms of media has been well studied.

The Damage Done?

Negative media portrayals have the propensity to 'generate intense emotional responses' that override positive and corrective information (Stuart 2006, p. 102). Although follow-up research has not been done to assess whether the effect of these emotional responses are long-lasting, such negatively biased representations have been said to be the main source for the stigmatization of patients, psychiatric treatment and competent psychiatrists themselves (Möller-Leimkühler et al., 2016). In the worst-case scenario, these negative stereotypes may contribute to lack of help-seeking, non-compliance to treatment and even discourage medical students from choosing psychiatry as a profession.

On a separate note, Macfarlane (2004) cautions that even positive portrayals could be harmful by creating unrealistic expectations of psychiatrists and treatment outcomes, effectively setting psychiatry up for failure. For instance, the oft-used 'cathartic cure' in which patients are suddenly cured often after a dramatic interaction with their therapist, feeds the desires of audiences to be entertained, but grossly misrepresents the gradual progress of successful treatment, often without medication. For better or for worse, dramatizations and polarizations are powerful in provoking emotions and potentially influencing audiences. The reality of treatment is 'dull' and makes for 'likely disasters at the box office' (Gabbard 2001, p. 366). Even documentaries tend to exaggerate to keep audiences entertained (Byrne, 2009).

Indeed, in a survey of *Cuckoo's* effects on attitudes in 146 students, Domino (1983) found that they displayed significantly less positive attitudes towards mental health professionals, mental hospitals and facilities, mentally ill patients and mental illness as a psychosocial entity after watching the film. Conversely, a documentary hypothesized to balance the film's portrayal showed no influence on attitudes. However, no follow-up was done to demonstrate permanence of such attitude shifts and as Domino (1983) himself cautioned, the specific results of this small study are tentative and require replication. Subsequent studies have focused on the impact of media on shaping public opinion of

mental illness and the mentally ill rather than the broader field of psychiatry itself. Notably thus, the stated harms inflicted by biased popular culture portrayals are at best, well-reasoned conjectures rather than evidence-based statements.

The Potential for Gains

Interestingly, Anderson (2003) argues that 'the notion that film representation and newspaper reporting of mental illness are responsible for the formation of public opinion is a myth.' Rather than directly imposing ideas on the masses, media expression is shaped by existing culture, and audiences are active (and sensible) in the processing of information received. Viewed in this way, media portrayals may be helpful in amplifying public opinion for effective societal change. Cuckoo's depiction of psychiatry, however inaccurate, is said to have pioneered the movement towards the 1960s deinstitutionalization of psychiatric care and to this day, continues to have a lasting influence on psychiatric institutional management (Zimmerman 2012).

To borrow a Hollywood adage, the only thing worse than bad publicity is no publicity at all. Whether positive or negative, mass media portrayal of psychiatry serves as a potential conduit for mass influence. In a small study of an interdisciplinary curriculum for psychiatric residents and journalism students, Campbell et al. (2009) demonstrated the potential for collaboration between the two groups. At the end of six months, the attitudes of both groups were less extreme: psychiatric residents were more confident in their abilities to impact community attitudes and journalism students had a deeper appreciation of the challenges presented by mental health stigma. While psychiatry has historically maintained its distance from media, there is great potential for collaboration between the two fields, particularly with appropriate training on both sides.

In fact, collaborations between mental health organisations and the media have demonstrated this potential to shift mental health beliefs. BeyondBlue: the national depression initiative has been found to positively influence beliefs about psychiatrists and psychologists (albeit a small effect), depression treatment, especially counselling and medication, and promote help-seeking (Jorm, Christensen & Griffiths 2005). Similarly, the Australian government's Mindframe National Media Initiative to address mental illness stigma and suicide prevention is guided by an advisory group comprised of key media representatives, mental health experts, regulatory bodies and consumer representatives and has contributed to increased awareness and more sensitive media reporting (Skehan et al. 2006). Similar partnerships aimed specifically at creating more positive attitudes towards psychiatry may also be effective in bringing a more balanced view of psychiatry to mass consciousness.

Frenemies: Both Friends and Foes

Whether the portrayal of psychiatry in popular culture is helpful or harmful remains an interesting research question that has yet to be answered conclusively. Pragmatically speaking though, does it even matter? Regardless of whether current portrayals of psychiatry in popular culture are to blame, research suggests that psychiatry is suffering from a negative image (Möller-Leimkühler et al., 2016). We know that mass media has a powerful potential to influence popular attitudes. We also have evidence that collaborations between the mental health and media sectors have great potential for mutual benefit.

As foes, mass media and popular culture are forces to be reckoned with. As friends however, they serve as allies for mass influence. The popular culture term “frenemy” is an oxymoron that describes the relationship between friends with a fundamental disagreement. Psychiatry and popular culture may never fully resonate with each other, but they can certainly work at becoming “frenemies” for mutual benefit.

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