

STIGMA: SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE  
PORTRAYAL OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE  
MASS MEDIA

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These notes are intended to provide some context for the consideration of the media's contribution to the stigmatization of the mentally ill and of research on that problem. They represent further development of a paper delivered at Horizon House Institute conference on The Community Imperative in Washington, D.C. in 1978.

To the extent that the behavior of mentally ill persons can be shown to violate some social norms, they suffer the fact of all those whom culture labels deviants. The therapeutic approach to the mentally ill conflicts with the social control functions of culture. It is from that basic conflict that our problems with media portrayals arise. As long as culture cultivates inequities as the norms of society, the mentally ill, along with other potential norm-violators, will be stigmatized by culture.

In the following I would like to describe this cultural scenario, sketch certain aspects of the image of the mentally ill in it, report some research that bears on that image, and suggest some things we might do.

STORY TELLING AND DEVIANCE

The heart of the cultural system is what I call the great storytelling process. From childhood and throughout life we tell stories that make the invisible forces of life visible through creating

images of people representing ideas and social types, and assigning some fate to each. These are fictional and dramatic stories showing how things work, news and documentary stories showing selected glimpses at how things are, and stories presenting styles of life telling us what values we should choose and at what price, called advertisements. This great story-telling process socializes people into roles and cultivates assumptions about the world and society. When the structure of social relationships and of power have large inequities in it, the effort to make people accept their place and to justify their inequitable relationships toward others calls for some specific symbolic manipulation. We call this manipulation stereotyping, prejudice, shaming, stigmatization.

If deviants didn't exist, they would have to be invented to generate a sense of what the norms are, what the price for violations might be, and how to exact that price. In fact, deviations are selected for portrayal in news to serve those functions, and invented in fiction and drama to the same net effect. These patterns have developed over time not for therapeutic or reform purposes but to deal with the large majorities who need to be socialized into role conformity and acquiescence and dependence on authority for support and protection.

Stories of crime and violence particularly provide a highly selective and synthetic picture. Their overall patterns have little if any relationship to the actual nature and distribution of these events. Their most general functions appear to be the stigmatization of deviants and the maintaining of a high level of insecurity. These functions mobilize popular support for control measures and, if necessary, for the repression of threats to the social order.

In order to perform these functions, images of deviants have certain characteristics. They tend to develop in predictable ways to depict menacing forces against whom people need to be protected by strong and frequent resort to violence.

#### IMAGES OF THE MENTALLY ILL

The cultural image of mental illness has some additional and special ingredients. The first of these is unpredictability. That means that there is no sure way of telling who is that kind of deviant, or when anyone might go berserk, and being once so labeled means danger forever. If you cannot predict how people might behave, you cannot be expected to act considerately and rationally toward them.

The second critical aspect of the image is danger. The sense of danger is constantly reinforced by the label "ex-mental patient" being attached almost exclusively to violent and bizarre behavior.

How often have we read in the newspaper that "Mr. John Smith, ex-mental patient, was elected President of the local Rotary Club last night?" And yet that is probably much more frequent than the more usual newspaper story reporting some outburst of seemingly irrational violence.

Finally, the image of mental illness usually contains a touch of evil. Sin or moral flaw tend to justify the potential irrationality and brutality of the relationship toward the persons depicted as if to suggest that they asked for it or deserve it.

This set of characteristics of the image of deviance and stigmatization is found in many studies of the image of mental illness in popular fiction, news and other materials. Our own studies of some twenty years ago<sup>1</sup> showed that the image of the mentally ill in the mass media was in its essentials farther removed from actual characteristics established by mental health professionals than was the image of the general public. In other words, instead of mediating between the experts and the public, media imagery pulled the public image away from the image of the experts in the direction of traditional prejudices.

#### News Coverage

In an article headlined "Son of Sam -- Boon for Dailies," the trade paper Advertising Age commented on April 11, 1977 that "Nothing sells newspapers like a killer on the loose." A study of what makes a killer top news copy found that the most likely elements were (1) insanity ("psychopathic killer," "homicidal maniac," etc; (2) unpredictability (multiple personality, ordinarily mild-mannered, a "loner," etc.), and (3) victimization of ordinary people, like the reader, implying menace lurking in every corner. In a paraphrase of the Advertising Age comment, the study concluded that "Nothing sells newspapers like an insane, unpredictable, undetectable, subtle, gory killer on the loose who has caused a great deal of pain and anguish to the friends and relatives of the victims -- all of high moral character."<sup>2</sup>

Another study demonstrated selective reporting and of the resulting public misconception.<sup>3</sup> Part of the study dealt with perceptions of the "criminally insane." That is a legally innocuous classification but one that seems to conjure up particularly lurid public images. A survey of 413 households contained a question that asked respondents to name some people who are "criminally insane," without defining the term. All those named were murderers. Most were mass murderers or assassins and would-be assassins of Presidents and other dignitaries.

The term "criminally insane" legally means incompetent to stand trial in a felony case. The vast majority of the "criminally insane" commit crimes against property and minor offenses. Only 14 percent have even been accused of murder. But as the term is used in ordinary reporting, it is attached only to the most irrational and heinous behavior.

#### Television Drama

Our own studies of television network dramatic content<sup>4</sup> since 1967 found that about 10 percent of the programs regularly involve some depiction or theme that has to do with mental illness. About 2 percent of the major characters, year in and year out, are identified as mentally ill, mental patients, ex-mental patients and so on. In the late evening, with more violent programming, the percentage doubles.

The mentally ill is the group most likely to be both violent and victimized in the world of television. Out of all prime time dramatic characters, 40 percent of -- if I may use the term -- normals are violent but 73 percent of the characters characterized as mentally ill are violent. Forty-four percent of the normals but 81 percent of the mentally ill become victims of violence.

Ten percent of the normals are killers and 5 percent are killed. But 23 percent of those characterized as mentally ill are killers and 23 percent are killed. The treatment is a tooth for a tooth; no other group in the fictional population suffers (and is shown to deserve) such fate.

While "only" 24 percent of all prime time female characters are violent, 71 percent of mentally ill prime time female characters are violent. The label of mental illness not only makes women almost as violent as men but it also makes women much more vulnerable to victimization. For every 10 normal male victims of violence there are 17 mentally ill male victims; for every 10 normal female victims of violence there are 25 mentally ill female victims. Upper and lower class characters are also more mental illness prone (and thus more violence and victimization prone) than are middleclass characters.

The most mental illness prone occupations are clerical, sales, manual labor, crime (a large group in the world of television) and science. The image of the mad scientist is the image of individual intelligence running out of social control. Few fictional mad scientists work for DuPont, General Dynamics or General Electric. The least mental illness prone occupations are owners and proprietors, policemen, farmers and ministers.

"Good" characters comprise 59 percent of all characters but only 21 percent of mentally ill. The vast majority of mentally ill characters on television, and I would say in all popular

fiction, are not only dangerous but also are touched with a sense of evil that justifies mistrust and eventual victimization.

#### SOME SOCIAL FUNCTIONS

A large part of the process of cultivating social norms consists of exhibiting their violations and labelling them crime, vice, and deviance of all sorts. The function of such stigmatization is basically to put and keep people "in their place." It is not only to compel conformity and expose violations as immoral or dangerous or both, but also to anticipate and justify the neutralization or victimization of violators.

Social behavior that is misanthropic, prejudicial, often murderous, is made acceptable through the effective use of images of some abhorrent reality or implacable enemy. We can behave barbarically toward a group of people whom we label as irrational, unpredictable and potentially barbarian. Large scale terror can be sustained by vivid images of horror that would be visited upon us if we didn't keep "them" under control.

Our studies show that heavy viewing of television tends to cultivate a sense of danger and mistrust. The mentally ill is a stigmatized group that serves as a lightning rod for pent-up insecurities and, at the same time, demonstrates the moral and physical price to be paid for deviance.

These mechanisms do not stem from easily manipulated or superficial public ignorance. They are deeply rooted and functional cultural dynamics that maintain a social structure with all its inequities. What is the role of research into the cultural roots and media policies that produce these images, and what kind of research might be useful?

#### RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Systematic and sustained research is needed to test and amplify the cultural scenario I have just sketched and to relate the findings to cultural policy-making. Earlier studies traced trends in the representation of mental illness in all mass media<sup>5</sup> and in the regulation of mental illness content in motion pictures and television.<sup>6,7</sup> These need to be brought up to date and continued in conjunction with the ongoing research on television content and conceptions of social reality held by viewers. The existing data bank of coded observation of dramatic television content since 1967 contains information which, when refined and elaborated, can yield indicators of trends in portrayals.

Once a continuing effort is underway to trace images of mental illness over time, a parallel study should track viewer concep-

tions cultivated by these images, and trends in those conceptions. The results would provide policy makers, mental health professionals, the general public and the media industries with information they now lack. Systematic, cumulative, and periodically reported information about the cultural sources and functions of popular conceptions of mental illness can provide the basis for new judgments and decisions in cultural policy.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Nunnally, Jum C. Jr. PUBLIC CONCEPTIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1961. Chapters 6 and 7.
2. Kalbfleisch, Pamela J. The Portrayal of the Killer in Society: A Comparison Study. Unpublished research paper. Department of Communication, Michigan State University, 1979.
3. Steadman, Henry J., and Cocozza, Joseph J. Selective Reporting and the Public's Misconceptions of the Criminally Insane. PUBLIC OPINION QUARTERLY, Winter 1977-78.
4. The project from which these data come is called Cultural Indicators. A recent report of that project is "Demonstration of Power: Violence Profile No. 10," by George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Nancy Signorielli and Marilyn Jackson-Beeck, JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION, 29:177-201, Summer 1979.
5. Gerbner, George. Psychology, Psychiatry and Mental Illness in the Mass Media: A Study of Trends, 1900-1959. MENTAL HYGIENE, 45:89-93, January, 1961.
6. Gerbner, George, and Tannenbaum, Percy H. Mass Media Censorship and the Portrayal of Mental Illness: Some Effects of Industry-Wide Controls in Motion Pictures and Television. In STUDIES OF INNOVATION AND OF COMMUNICATION TO THE PUBLIC. Schramm, W. (ed.). Stanford University, 1962.
7. Gerbner, George. Regulation of Mental Illness Content in Motion Pictures and Television. GAZETTE, 6:365-385, 1961.