

Stigma: Social Functions of the Portrayal of Mental Illness in the Mass Media

George Gerbner

The media have an impact on public attitudes toward mental illness. George Gerbner describes the role of the media in perpetuating negative attitudes and stereotypes of the mentally ill. Gerbner first describes how cultural images interact with public perceptions of deviance. To the extent that the mentally ill violate social norms, they are grouped with other deviants and suffer consequences. Furthermore, he says, "As long as the culture cultivates inequities as the norms of society, the mentally ill, along with other potential norm-violators, will be stigmatized by culture." According to Gerbner, specific symbolic manipulation (which can be called either "stereotyping," "prejudice," or "stigmatization") is required to make people accept social and power inequities. Stories of crime and violence are particularly suitable for the portrayal of deviants and the price they pay for breaking the social norms. These stories act to "mobilize popular support for control measures and, if necessary, for the repression of threats to the social order."

The cultural images of mental illness in the media reflect traditional prejudices. A predominant image of the mentally ill is one of unpredictability. As Gerbner points out, "If you cannot predict how people might behave, you cannot be expected to act considerately and rationally toward them." A second critical aspect of the image of mental illness is dangerousness. The sense of dangerousness, according to Gerbner, is constantly reinforced by having the label "ex-mental patient" attached almost exclusively to violent and bizarre behavior. The third aspect of the cultural image of mental illness is a sense of evil.

Gerbner's explanation is that sinful or immoral behavior warrants an irrational and brutal response toward the persons depicted, as if to suggest that they ask for it or deserve it.

Gerbner found in his studies that media images of the mentally ill are more in line with the traditional prejudices than the actual characteristics perceived by mental health professionals. Unpredictability, dangerousness, and evil characterize the mentally ill in popular fiction, news, and other materials. He describes news coverage, and how it can perpetuate stereotyped images of the mentally ill. According to Gerbner, murder and violence are selling points for newspapers. Characteristics of killers most often include insanity, unpredictability, and the victimization of ordinary people. Gerbner cites studies that demonstrate selective reporting and can cause subsequent public misconceptions. A survey of 413 households asked respondents to name people who are criminally insane, without defining the term. All those named were murderers—many, mass murderers. Actually, as Gerbner points out, "The term 'criminally insane' legally means being insane at the time of the crime and thus incompetent to stand trial in a felony case. The vast majority of the 'criminally insane' commit crimes against property and other minor offenses. Only 14 percent have even been accused of murder."

Since 1967, Gerbner has done studies of television network dramatic content. He finds that 10 percent of the programs involve mental illness, and 2 percent of the major characters (4 percent in late evening) are identified as mentally ill. Forty percent of all prime-time "normal" characters are violent, but 73 percent of the mentally ill characters are violent. In addition, almost twice as many of the mentally ill characters on TV are victims of violence.

A mentally ill female character has a 71 percent chance of being portrayed as violent, while "only" 24 percent of all prime-time female characters are violent. Gerbner cites statistics related to victims of crime also. For every 10 normal male victims of violence, there are 17 mentally ill male victims; for every 10 normal female victims, there are 25 mentally ill female victims. Upper and lower class characters are more likely to be portrayed as mentally ill than are middle-class characters, and thus are more prone to violence and victimization. Occupations portrayed with the most mentally ill charac-

ters include manual laborers, scientists, clerical and sales people, as well as criminals. Less mental illness is found among the occupations of proprietors, police officers, farmers, and ministers. As Gerbner has shown, "The vast majority of mentally ill characters on TV . . . are not only dangerous, but also are touched with a sense of evil that justifies mistrust and eventual victimization."

In short, Gerbner believes that the media set the norms for society as well as the price for deviance. The mentally ill, according to Gerbner, "is a stigmatized group that serves as a lightning rod for [viewers'] pent-up insecurities and, at the same time, demonstrates the moral and physical price to be paid for deviance." Gerbner suggests that research efforts should trace images of mental illness in the media over time, while also tracking viewer conceptions cultivated by these images. As he states, "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."

RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

- We should continue to refine the investigation of the mentally ill as they are portrayed on television and in other media to determine the influence of such portrayals on public attitudes.