Mental Illness and its Portrayal in Media: When to Intervene? – A Review

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Abstract: We know that stigma exists with respect to mental illness and we also know that this interferes with the treatment-seeking behaviour of the individuals and adds to further difficulties after diagnosis, which is adjusting back to the society. On analysing where the stigma stems from, one of the factors identified is the media and its portrayal of mental illness. Having the young population exposed to the negative content when their attitudes are developing leads to negative perceptions expressed in later life. Hence, knowing that media propagates negative views, with children utilising it maximum at their stage of life, this paper attempts to highlight the gap with respect to stigma attached to mental illness that needs to be filled and targeting content at this stage itself will act as a protective factor facilitating positive views about the domain of mental health in general.
Keywords: Mental illness, stigma, media, portrayal, attitude formation, young children.

INTRODUCTION

Stigma is a social construct which is more than the use of negative labels or wrong words; it coveys disrespect for the individual suffering from mental illness and discourages them [1]. The labels, conveying negative attitudes, most commonly used as adjectives are mentally unbalanced or unstable, unpredictable, and a broken woman [1].

Among the Asian Americans, it has been found out that stigma acts one of the barriers in preventing an individual suffering from mental illness from seeking help [2], medication adherence, and overall recovery [3]. Media has become an ubiquitous phenomenon and hence it becomes very important to understand how it influences the construction of our value set [4]. We easily can say how media is part of both our private as well as public lives [5]. The term "mental health literacy" was given by Jorm in 1997 which means to derive information in ways that will promote and maintain good health [6] and yet, experiments have found that there indeed exists a link between how media portrays mental illness and the negative attitudes associated with mental illness [7].

Role of media

Media is a medium of communication which informs, educates or entertains the consumers and acts as a mirror for them [8] which has been identified as a medium to communicate societal values via symbolic forms [9]. In addition, television has been identified as playing an important role in the formation of attitudes toward different cultures, ethnicities and other groups which inculcates a certain perception towards social reality and multicultural awareness [4,8]. One of the primary source identified for acquiring knowledge about mental illness is media [8]. Professionals in the field of mental health also put the blame on media for disseminating stigma and discrimination towards individuals suffering from mental illness resulting from inaccurate depictions [3,8]. Even till date, research has found that the coverage of mental illness in media is dominated by negative portrayals [10]. Different forms of media need to address as it is not due to one medium but different mediums communicating the same message that leads to similar image of mental illness [8]. With the existence of negative attitudes, it becomes distressing for the family members as well and leads to social repercussions stemming from the fear of social dysfunction and disability [3].

Dis-inhibition theory provides a view regarding how continued exposure to a certain kind of behavioural tendencies can lead the individual being more open to perform such a behaviour [6]. According to cultivation theory, attitudes become more consistent with the portrayal of reality in media than media itself as the exposure to it increases [6,8]. This spreading of negative attitude and maintenance of it requires attention [9].

Portrayal of mental illness in media

Even though Thomas Jefferson wished to promote "all men are created equal", television does not follow this famous principle which is evidenced by the percentage of type of characters that appear on programmes on television [4]. With mental illness being

common all around the world [10], the prime-time programmes still portray some aspect of mental illness with statistics showing how 2-3% characters on these shows are shown to have mental illness from which one in four are involved in hurting others [3]. Another study showed that 72.1 % of prime-time shows showed mentally ill characters as killing others, and 75.7% were shown to be victims of violence, with only 2.7 % shown in light or comic roles [7]. Negative media reports such as a person suffering from mental illness committing a crime contributes to negative attitudes, such as 'dangerous' and 'violent', towards them when corrective information is not present to the individuals prior to reading the news [8,11]. This has been perpetuated by movies such as Psycho (1960) which become popular and lead to reality and fiction cross-over [8]. These films have been shown to have a lasting effect on attitudes towards mental illness [9].

What the media fails to portray is how these conditions can be treated [9]. Even the personal stories of individuals and their recovery is lacking from sources of news item leading to the scepticism regarding psychiatric treatment [3]. Another important factor noticed in Bollywood as well as Hollywood is how any mental health professional is portrayed and the techniques that they use [8,12]. This can fairly contribute to the fear of approaching a professional in times of need.

Children and media
One of the crucial aspects of development is the cognitive development which involves higher order functioning further affecting how one deals with the surrounding world. Electronic media, particularly television, has a potential impact on how children sense, perceive, recognise, judge, reason, and solve interactions between oneself and the outside world [13]. India is one of the countries with largest population exposed to unrestrained media [8] and children today as early as infants of 5 months are exposed to television [14]. Television becomes an important medium because it is reported that 99% of individuals have television at home, half have two, and 36% have one in their bedroom [13].

The negative portrayal is spread in the children's media as well in which the individuals suffering from mental illness are portrayed as objects of amusement, inferior, and fear [3]. Few examples of cartoons portraying characters indicative of mental illness include Family Guy, Calvin and Hobbes, Charlie Brown, Simpsons, and Dora the Explorer [15]. Without targeting any specific symptom or diagnosis, it leads to generalisations which are negative to all the individuals suffering from mental illness [3]. This is important because children and teenagers have been classified as heavy viewers (one's viewing television > 4 hours per day) [4] and this is the stage wherein they do not have the capacity to distinguish between fact and fiction

[3,5]. In addition, according to Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory and script theories, modelling occurs in which children can learn stereotypical behaviours, specific judgements, and sets of values by observing others and develop knowledge and beliefs about the world which further guides their behaviour [4]. The attitude that adolescents imbibe depends on the information obtained from the television, apart from instructions from schools [7]. Till the time they become adults, they become exposed to innumerable media portrayals of mental illness due to which misconceptions are reinforced and intolerance towards individuals suffering from mental illness increases [3]. Individuals whose cultural life has a heavy influence of television from infancy tend to absorb the image portrayed in television and display intolerance towards other people's opinion or view [4]. Hence, addressing this issue at an early stage itself is important because the schemas formed early in life emerge full-blown in adulthood [14]. Scheff (1999) suggests how the actual meaning of 'crazy' is imbibed by the child in the early years of schooling itself [16]. What the children acquire is not a crystallized knowledge of what mental illness is and how it manifests but is the notion that mental illnesses are less desirable than other health conditions [16].

Importance of media
The change in attitude is also attributed to how the media represents the news and what language do they use [9]. This becomes important because media is used by individuals to share their experiences as well as to obtain information about the disorder as well as treatment and outcome possibilities [5,7]. A study showed that out of every eight individuals that participated in the study, seven derived the information about mental illness from television and news programs [7]. Also, gathering information via this medium indicates lower tolerance towards someone who is diagnosed with any mental illness [8].

People fail to monitor the origin of the information provided and rely on the heuristics of availability and representativeness which with repeated exposures leads to self-validation of the correctness of the understanding developed from the information [17]. It becomes dangerous because of the third-person effect wherein the individuals believe that the television portrayals affect others more than they affect them [18].

The maintenance of negative stereotypes in media can be attributed to the premise that 'sensation sells' on which the journalists work and how they are not themselves well-informed about the domain of mental health issues [5,9]. News, due to the assumption of it providing factual information, reinforces the negative stereotypes [3,9].

In the media industry, portrayal of psychiatry and mental illness is not something that is newly

developed and classic cinema representing madness continue to be showcased on television such as Psycho and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest [5,8,19]. The negative attitudes, maintained due to continuous exposure to negative stereotypes presented by the media, have an impact on the individuals suffering from mental illness in terms of housing, job and even making friends [9,11].

One of the identified factors in stigma is the fear of people with mental illness perpetuated by the media which leads to rejection of individuals suffering from psychiatric disorder [11]. Little corrective attitudes are seen when interventions have been employed to counter the media images presented such as depiction of mental health establishments in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest [11]. It has also been reported how there is no difference between various forms of media, be it newspapers or television, in the way they encourage harsher attitude toward individuals suffering from mental illness [11].

A movement towards de-stigmatization

De-stigmatization needs to involve media so that positive and real images of mental illness are portrayed and disseminated by involving local level views [9]. Short-term benefits for attitude change have been found in research [20] but the interventions designed target adult population. In United States, there is a guideline stating how it is discouraged to expose children to television in the first two years of life, the awareness of which is hardly limited to 6% of parents. It was considered as guideline because it was recognized how critical is the window of neurological development at this stage [14,21]. Guidelines like this have limited awareness and involvement of mental health professionals in writing articles which can help construct positive views are done minimally at present [9]. Another factor that can aid in minimizing the effects is the availability of multiple genres and views to choose from which contributes in the understanding that there are multiple perspective on reality [4]. A pilot study to understand whether using psychiatrists as a source would improve media's depiction of mental illness was carried out, the results of which pointed in a positive direction when psychiatrists will work in close relationship with journalists and incorporate their policies and practices in developing the model [22]. This is because the language used can be tailored sensitively to avoid having an unclear communication [8].

CONCLUSION

Understanding how having prior corrective information can avoid leading to negative attitudes towards mental illness, encouraging critical thinking [11], and difficulty to apply mass persuasive messages to change attitudes once formed, children's media can be targeted as an initial intervention or educational strategy and the effects of which can help in further

research. Media such as television reach children before formal education and act as one of the first influences apart from family [16,13] and understanding its effect on cognitive development will help them raise in an environment which does not start targeting a change in adulthood but initiates with planting an appropriate seed in the growing years itself.

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