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Student Research

*The Relationship between Media Portrayal of Schizophrenia and Attitudes toward Those with Schizophrenia**

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to learn whether positive media portrayals of schizophrenia affect people's attitudes toward individuals with schizophrenia. Fifty (50) participants viewed one of two videos—either a control video showing a documentary about koalas or a treatment clip from the television show *Perception* that portrays a professor with schizophrenia effectively teaching a class. After viewing the video, participants rated their attitudes toward a person with schizophrenia on a dangerousness scale as well as on cognitive and behavioral attitudes scales. The participants who watched the treatment clip rated people with schizophrenia as significantly less dangerous and had significantly more positive cognitive attitudes toward them compared to those who viewed the control video. There was no significance in behavioral attitudes between the two groups.

KEY WORDS Schizophrenia; Media; Mental Illness; Stigma; Attitudes

Schizophrenia is an often misunderstood mental illness, in part because of what is shown in the media. Films often portray people with schizophrenia negatively, adding to the stigma against those with the disease; people with schizophrenia are viewed as being dangerous, unpredictable, and irresponsible (Penn, Chamberlin, and Mueser 2003). It would be helpful to learn more about people's reactions to positive and negative portrayals of people with schizophrenia to fight the stigma associated with the illness, in order to show that persons with schizophrenia are no different than any of us.

Several studies have shown that media clips have an effect on people's attitudes. A study done by Bateman, Sakano, and Fujita (1992) found that people who viewed a popular film called *Roger and Me*, which portrayed the car company

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General Motors in a negative light, had more negative attitudes toward General Motors and U. S. businesses in general compared to people who did not view the film. A study by Beattie, Sale, and Mcguire (2011) showed participants powerful excerpts from *An Inconvenient Truth* (a film about global warming) and measured their attitudes on different scales. These authors found that viewing the film clips did indeed affect the participants' emotions and attitudes toward global warming. Another study (Koordeman, Anschutz, and Engels 2014) examined the effects of positive and negative portrayals of alcohol use in movies and in attitude toward the movies. They found that participants were more engaged with and had a more positive attitude toward movie clips with alcohol portrayals compared to the same movie clips with no alcohol portrayals. There was a difference between the positive and negative portrayals.

A study done by Penn, Chamberlin, and Mueser (2003) examined whether viewing a documentary that depicts individuals with schizophrenia can reduce stigma. The findings showed that, compared to the other experimental conditions, viewing the documentary about schizophrenia resulted in more benign attributions about schizophrenia (e.g., viewers were less likely to blame individuals with schizophrenia for their actions) but did not change general attitudes about schizophrenia (e.g., perceived dangerousness). The film also did not increase participants' intentions to interact with persons with schizophrenia.

One of the more prevalent stereotypes about characters with severe mental illness found in movies is as dangerous and violent. For example, Penn, Kommana, Mansfield, and Link (1999:437) found that people who are diagnosed with severe mental illness are more likely to be shown as violent than are people without the same diagnosis. Owen's (2012) research supports a different viewpoint; she found that people with severe mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than the perpetrators of the violence. Moviemakers tend to emphasize the grossly disorganized and bizarre behaviors, as well as the vivid hallucinations, of their characters with schizophrenia; however, the negative symptoms of schizophrenia, such as affective flattening and avolition, are more prominent in real life, and auditory hallucinations are far more prevalent than the grandiose visual hallucinations that filmmakers tend to use.

The experiment at hand investigates how media portrayals of people with schizophrenia affect other people's perceptions of those with schizophrenia. The dependent variables used are the dangerousness scale (Link et al. 1987) and the cognitive and behavioral section of the Multidimensional Attitudes Scale Toward Persons With Disabilities (Findler, Vilchinsky, and Werner 2007). (See Appendix A.) The primary independent variable is the type of clip that is shown (a positive depiction of schizophrenia or a control). It is hypothesized that those viewing the positive portrayal of schizophrenia will view a person with schizophrenia as less dangerous than will those viewing the control and will have more positive cognitive and behavioral attitudes toward a person with schizophrenia.

METHODS

IRB Approval

A proposal including all the relevant documents pertaining to the study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board of Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana). The board reached a conclusion that the study was of minimal risk of harm to the participants involved, and thus, the study was approved.

Participants

Fifty (50) people participated, with 27 in the control group and 23 in the treatment group. A link was posted to the author's private Facebook account, on the Saint Mary's Class of 2016 Facebook group, and on the John Adams High School (South Bend, Indiana) Alumni Facebook group. The link was also sent to the psychology professors at Saint Mary's College, who shared it with their classes.

Materials

The videos used were a clip from a documentary about koalas (the control) and a clip showing a (fictitious) professor with schizophrenia giving a competent lecture (the treatment condition). Links to the videos are provided in Appendix B.

The survey consisted of a dangerousness scale and the Multidimensional Attitudes Scale Toward Persons With Disabilities (Appendix A). The dangerousness scale consists of six items about whether persons with mental illness are likely to be a danger to others, and are indicated on a 7-point scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater perception that the person is dangerous. (These questions pertained to people with schizophrenia in general, not just one person.) The individual items were summed, then divided by the number of items (taking the average) to get a score for this scale. A sample item, "I am less likely to trust this person," has a Cronbach's alpha of .810, indicating good reliability.

The Multidimensional Attitudes Scale Toward Persons With Disabilities comprises two categories: cognition (with a Cronbach's alpha of .878) and behavior (with a Cronbach's alpha of .802). The cognition category consists of four statements, and the behavior category consists of six statements. Responses are indicated on a 5-point scale, in which 1 = not at all and 5 = very much so. Some of the items were reverse-coded so higher scores on the scale indicate more positive attitudes toward a person with schizophrenia.

Procedure

Participants did not receive any benefits from participating in this research, and there were no inclusion or exclusion criteria. After giving consent, participants indicated which month they were born in. Birth month was used as a way to split the participants into control and treatment groups. Those born from January through June watched the control

video, and those born from July through December watched the treatment video. Both video clips were short, about one minute and thirty seconds long. The control video was from a documentary about koalas. The treatment video was from the television show *Perception* and showed Dr. Pierce, a college professor who has schizophrenia and exemplifies a healthy adult living with the disorder, giving an effective lecture. The instructions informed the participants about the professor's schizophrenia.

Following the video clips, each participant completed a survey about his or her attitudes toward people with schizophrenia. Participants were first asked to indicate their level of disagreement or agreement with six statements about the perceived danger of people with schizophrenia. They responded to the six items on a scale from 1 to 7 (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Participants were then asked to indicate their level of disagreement or agreement with several statements measuring attitudes about a person with schizophrenia. Cognitive and behavioral attitudes were measured on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = not at all; 5 = very much so).

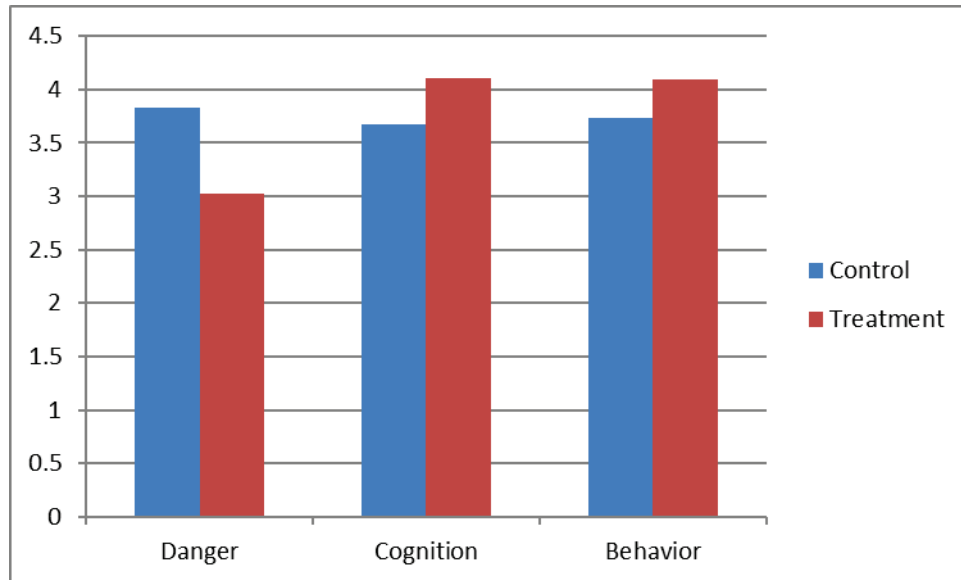
RESULTS

One-way ANOVAs were conducted on the three dependent variables (danger, cognition, and behavior). The independent variable in this analysis was the nature of the video clip: control or treatment. Two of the three ANOVAs were statistically significant. Participants who viewed the treatment video viewed the person with schizophrenia as significantly ($F = 5.54, p < 0.05$) less dangerous (median 3.03) compared to those who viewed the control video (median 3.83) (Figure 1). Participants who viewed the treatment video had significantly more positive cognitive attitudes ($F = 5.14, p < 0.05$) toward a person with schizophrenia compared to participants who viewed the control video (median 4.11 and 3.68, respectively). There was no significant difference in behavioral attitudes in the two groups ($F = 2.89, p > 0.05$) toward a person with schizophrenia (median 3.74 for the treatment vs. median 4.09 for the control).

DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous studies, the current research found that media clips affect people's attitudes. Participants who first watched a film clip showing a positive portrayal of a person with schizophrenia viewed a person with schizophrenia as significantly less dangerous when compared to those who had watched a control video. Those who viewed the positive film clip had more positive cognitive attitudes toward a person with schizophrenia compared to those who watched the control video, although they did not have significantly different behavioral attitudes. A potential explanation for the insignificant findings regarding behavioral attitudes is that watching one short video clip may not be sufficiently powerful to alter behavior intentions. Another explanation could be that the scale measured behavioral intentions rather than actual behavior, which are different processes.

Figure 1. Participants' Views of Persons with Schizophrenia



Penn et al. (2003) examined whether viewing a documentary that positively depicts individuals with schizophrenia can reduce stigma. Their findings showed that compared to the other experimental conditions, watching a documentary about schizophrenia resulted in more benign attributions about schizophrenia (e.g., less likely to blame individuals with schizophrenia for the disorder) but did not change general attitudes about schizophrenia (e.g., perceived dangerousness). The film also did not increase participants' intentions to interact with persons with schizophrenia. The current study extended those findings by indicating that a film clip showing a positive portrayal of a person with schizophrenia can change people's attitudes about perceived dangerousness of individuals with schizophrenia. The results of this study, consistent with the results of the earlier study, showed that watching the positive film clip did not increase the participants' intentions to interact with a person with schizophrenia.

The limitations of the current study should be noted. First, the sample size of 50 participants was relatively small, which may have contributed to the insignificant results for behavioral attitudes. Future studies should have larger sample sizes in order to enhance the statistical power of the results. Second, other variables that were not included may explain any differences in the results. For example, participants could have had prior knowledge or experience with individuals with schizophrenia. Finally, the manipulation portrayed only a positive version of a person with schizophrenia; a negative portrayal of a person with schizophrenia could also have been shown to come to better results.

Future research could address these and other limitations. Increasing the sample size would increase the confidence that can be placed in the results. Including an additional manipulation with a negative portrayal of schizophrenia would provide further insight into how media portrayals affect attitudes toward those with schizophrenia.

The results of this study offer implications for the portrayal of persons with schizophrenia in the media. It was found that those viewing schizophrenia in a positive light were more likely to view persons with schizophrenia as less dangerous and to have more positive attitudes toward persons with schizophrenia. Movie and television producers should appreciate the power they have in shaping people's attitudes and should be careful with how they portray those with schizophrenia and perhaps also those with other mental illnesses. A person reviewing this study could be more aware of his or her attitudes toward persons with schizophrenia and other mental illnesses by being aware that those attitudes are shaped at least partially by what they view in the media.

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APPENDIX A

Dangerousness Scale

Directions: Based on your views of people with schizophrenia, please indicate your reactions to the following statements. Indicate your response on a 7-point scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

Dangerousness Scale

1. If this person lived nearby, I would not allow my children to go to the movie theater alone.
2. If this person applied for a teaching position at a grade school and was qualified for the job I would recommend not hiring him/her.
3. One important thing about this person is that you cannot tell what they will do from one minute to the next.
4. I am less likely to trust this person.
5. If this person lived nearby, I would hesitate to allow young children under my care on the sidewalk.
6. There should be a law forbidding this person the right to obtain a hunting license.

Multidimensional Attitudes Scale Toward Persons With Disabilities (modified)

Directions: Based on your views of people with schizophrenia, please indicate your reactions to the following statements. Indicate your response on a 5-point scale, from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much.

Cognition

1. He/she seems like an interesting guy/girl.
2. He/she looks like an OK person.
3. We may get along really well.
4. He/she looks friendly.

Behavior

1. Move away
2. Get up and leave
3. Continue what he/she was doing
4. Find an excuse to leave
5. Move to another table
6. Start a conversation

APPENDIX B

Control Clip (koalas): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3ozlzGsdEM>

Positive Clip (Perception): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gegXhNcuKo>