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The Portrayal of Psychologists in Movies
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Abstract

Psychologists and psychiatrists have been portrayed in hundreds of films for nearly a century. They are most often depicted as clinicians working in various settings such as psychiatric hospitals and mental health centers. Many recent films have included psychologists as lead characters. Are these portrayals accurate? Are they improving? Are the age-old stereotypes subsiding? This article will consider these questions as they relate to the history of psychologists in film, typologies of psychologists in film, cross-cultural comparisons, and ways we can address these stereotypes to the general public. Recent films with balanced and unbalanced portrayals are discussed.

The Portrayal of Psychologists in Movies

Psychologists and psychiatrists are frequently portrayed in various media—including televised talk shows (Dr. Phil McGraw as the host of the daytime show, *Dr. Phil*), radio programs (Dr. Laura Schlesinger as a family therapist and syndicated radio personality), television situation comedies (Dr. Frasier Crane and Dr. Niles Crane as psychiatrists on the long-running *Frasier*), and drama series (HBO hit-series' *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* both have included important roles portraying a psychiatrist and psychologist, respectively).

We will use the term “psychologist” to generically refer to any professional in the role of “mental health practitioner,” such as psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, counselors, psychiatric nurses, and social workers. This is necessary because the specific profession of the mental health professional being portrayed is often not specified in movies. When we cite specific films, the title of the practitioner depicted is given if it is available. We are especially interested in stereotypes and misconceptions that influence the public’s image of mental health professionals.

The Problem

Relatively little has been written on the portrayal of psychologists in films. Two of the most articulate scholars in this area, Glen Gabbard and Irving Schneider, are psychiatrists with strong ties to psychoanalysis. Both Gabbard and Schneider have documented that movies are often inaccurate in their portrayal of mental health professionals (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999; Schneider, 1977; Schneider, 1985). Wedding and Boyd make the same point in their book *Movies and Mental Illness* (1999).

Films directly influence the public’s perception of psychotherapy and psychologists. Direct effects include misconceptions about what actually happens in a therapy session. This can result in false or flawed expectations, diminished interest in seeking treatment, or decreased motivation. It also can prevent individuals who would benefit from therapy from seeking help.

Films can also influence students who might be considering a career in a field such as clinical psychology. Gabbard and Gabbard (1999) document the negative correlation between the number of medical students specializing in psychiatry and negative public images of psychiatry in the media. It is reasonable to speculate that these relationships parallel those in psychology graduate programs. Gabbard and Gabbard also note that federal funding for psychiatric research and education appears to be inversely related with negative portrayals of mental health professionals in films.

Almost every clinician has heard a patient say something like “Gosh, Doc, this is not what I expected therapy to be like.” This raises obvious questions: What were the patient’s expectations and how did they develop in the first place? When queried, patients often report they expected there would be an easy solution to their problems--perhaps through the uncovering of one traumatic incident. They express concern about “being analyzed,” fearing they will be told all their problems are “in their head.” In addition, a dynamic of polarization often takes effect: patients may expect to do all the talking while the psychologist passively takes notes; alternately, the psychologist may be viewed as an expert

who should be earning his or her fee by working very hard in therapy. Either way, a collaborative balance is often not expected. Patients will frequently express to their peers that they are “going to the nuthouse” or “crazy-house” in reference to outpatient psychotherapy, using humor to lessen the stigma of receiving mental health services. We believe many of these attitudes are the direct result of negative portrayals of mental health professionals in the media.

The Persistence of Misconceptions

Predictable stereotypes occur when psychologists are portrayed in films. The number one reason for these misconceptions is fiscal—dramatic tension, boundary crossing, manipulation, and depicting therapists as foolish buffoons are all plot devices likely to sell movie tickets. Another common motif involves portraying psychologists as “flawed authorities.” Audiences enjoy seeing experts presented as weak, flawed, or limited human beings subject to corruption and manipulation.

It is likely that many filmmakers have limited experience with psychotherapy, and their perceptions have often been shaped by the same forces that influence the movie-going public. Filmmakers in general are fascinated with the field of psychology, and those without direct experience in therapy may nevertheless attempt to depict psychotherapists and psychotherapy. It seems predictable that filmmakers who have been in therapy would be especially sensitive to the role of the mental health professionals and make efforts to accurately depict their roles. However, a director like Woody Allen is a clear exception; Allen has been treated in analysis for many years and he often depicts psychoanalysts in his films, most often presenting them as rigid, obsessive, and slightly neurotic.

Common Misconceptions in Films

Psychologists are prone to innumerable jokes, criticisms, and inaccurate portrayals in films. Consider the following dialogue from *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2002) in which no therapist even appears in the film: “What does your therapist think of all this?” “Oh, I would never tell my therapist.” “Why not?” “Because it’s private.” The following portrayals are important sources of public confusion that go beyond playful banter and help shape the public’s perception of psychologists and other mental health professionals.

1. *Role confusion.* Many films use the term “psychiatrist” to refer to what would more accurately be identified as a psychologist’s role. The reality of practice in the twenty-first century is that a very limited number of psychiatrists practice psychotherapy, and their primary role has shifted to prescribing medications and managing their side effects. In fact, fifty-minute individual psychotherapy sessions are becoming quite rare in the practice of psychiatry. Nevertheless, it is typical to see films such as *Antwone Fisher* (2002) where the psychiatrist, played by Denzel Washington, has ample time for protracted individual therapy sessions, and there is no indication that the protagonist is taking medication.

2. *Psychoanalysis is the dominant practice in psychotherapy.* Many films portray psychologists practicing what is clearly psychoanalysis, although relatively few practicing psychologists (or psychiatrists) use psychoanalysis.

Woody Allen's latest film, *Anything Else* (2003), uses the hackneyed symbol of the analytic couch and portrays an analyst who goes out of his way to not speak or give any direction to help his patient, even when repeatedly asked.

3. *Psychologists are patently unethical.* Most psychologists get extensive training in ethics in graduate school, have to pass standardized examinations in ethics to become licensed, and are quite aware of ethical guidelines and principles of the American Psychological Association, codified in law in many states. Furthermore, it is rare for psychologists to cross ethical boundaries with patients. However, Hollywood would have viewers believe that unethical behavior (and especially dual relationships) is the norm in therapy. For example, in the film *Bliss* (1997), one of the psychologists depicted has sex with his patients as a form of avant-garde "sex therapy" and rationalizes his behavior by describing it as an effective intervention for patients with Borderline Personality Disorder. In *The Princess and the Warrior* (2000), the lead character, a psychiatric nurse, gives manual sex to a begging, hospitalized patient. *Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself* (2004) also portrays a psychiatric nurse compromising herself sexually; she denigrates her compassionate approach as group therapist with flirtations and sexual passes with the lead character, a hospitalized, severely suicidal patient. In *The Prince of Tides* (1991), Barbara Streisand plays a therapist who becomes both professionally and intimately involved with her patient's brother, and in *Mr. Jones* (1993) a psychiatrist participates in a torrid sexual relationship with her bipolar patient.

Harriet Schultz and Susan Dickson discovered that 90 percent of 504 survey respondents knew romantic relationships between therapist and patient are wrong, while 70 percent thought it was appropriate for therapists to have business or social relationships with patients upon termination of treatment (Sleek, 1998). The boundaries were also blurred among film critics. Mary Banks Gregerson studied reviews of *Good Will Hunting* (1997), where one scene shows the psychologist, Sean Maguire (Robin Williams), choking the patient (Matt Damon) when the psychologist is personally challenged. Gregerson found great variety in the critics' descriptions of the psychologist, ranging from "brilliant" to "troubled," with only one of more than 250 reviews questioning boundaries of the therapist's actions (Sleek).

4. *Psychologists are cavalier about boundary violations.* Many films depict psychologists as professionals who are insouciant with their psychotherapy boundaries. Often this type of violation is not obviously unethical but is at least highly questionable. Indeed, it is hard to find a movie involving psychotherapy that does not depict some form of boundary violation. For example, the *K-Pax* (2001) psychiatrist (Jeff Bridges) invites his patient, Prot (Kevin Spacey), to his own home for a family picnic, hoping Prot will garner a better understanding of the meaning of "family." In the films *Analyze This* (1998) and *Analyze That* (2002), a psychiatrist (Billy Crystal) continuously gives in to threats by his patient (Robert DeNiro), conducting psychotherapy in restaurants, in the middle of a shooting spree of gunfire, and during his own wedding. In addition, boundaries are violated when he accepts a very generous wedding gift (a lavish fountain) from his patient and continues therapy after termination. *What*

About Bob? (1991) is almost entirely based on jokes about the transference and countertransference relationship between the psychologist, Leo Marvin (Richard Dreyfuss) and his patient, Bob (Bill Murray). Leo Marvin commits numerous boundary violations in retaliation to Bob's dependent personality disorder.

5. *Almost all therapists are men.* The majority of films portray male psychologists, despite the fact that the numbers of female psychologists are rapidly increasing and for a number of years females have outnumbered males in many doctoral-level graduate programs around the country. Of all the various films mentioned throughout this paper, only a handful depict a female psychologist. These exceptions include two recent films that portray female characters with lead roles as a psychiatrist or psychologist--*Gothika* (2004) and *Lantana* (2001), and an older film, *Agnes of God* (1985), starring Jane Fonda as a psychiatrist. Female characters also have minimal roles in *I am Sam* (2001) as a psychometrist and expert witness, and *A Mighty Wind* (2003) where the total screen-time is less than 30 seconds. Females were also portrayed as psychiatric nurses in *Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself* (2004), *The Princess & the Warrior* (2000) and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and as a group home facilitator in *Spider* (2003). However, the prototypical mental health expert in films is almost always male, as illustrated by the classic male psychiatrist roles played by Simon Oakland in *Psycho* (1960), Judd Hirsch in *Ordinary People* (1980), Richard Burton in *Equus* (1977), and Marlon Brando in *Don Juan DeMarco* (1994).

When women are portrayed they are often depicted as unfulfilled and needing to make up for the lack of fulfillment in their personal life through compulsive working; the woman is often then cured through the love of her patient as in *Knock on Wood* (1954) (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1989). Kalisch, Kalisch, and McHugh (1982) performed a content analysis of 191 movies between 1930-1980 and found 73% of nurses were characterized as sex objects. Interestingly, sexual stereotyping of nurses was less common in films where the professionalism of nursing became important to the story or character development. Coleman (1995) also found that female therapists were more likely to engage in dual relationships than male therapists.

6. *Almost all therapists are white.* One is hard pressed to think of a film other than the recent films *Antwone Fisher* (2002) and *Manic* (2003) in which a mental health professional is portrayed as a member of a minority group. Whoopi Goldberg plays "Nurse Valerie" in *Girl, Interrupted* (1999) but she is ridiculed by Winona Ryder early in the film because she lacks the authority and training of the *bona fide* mental health professionals on the staff.

7. *Research is of little value.* As psychologists, we understand how critical research is for the development of our field. However, very few films depict psychologists performing research; when it is depicted, the psychologist is likely to be portrayed as someone who is both unethical and immoral, or as someone with malevolent or selfish motives. Consider the timely film, *Das Experiment* (2001), a German film with several parallels to Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment. The researchers are not depicted as having a reason for their research, and when it is conducted, chaos results because there is no one in control of the study. The researchers are portrayed as unethical, and

considerable blurring between fiction and reality occurs. The movie depicts rape, murder, beatings, and torture, which never occurred in the real experiment (Murray, 2002).

With all the stereotypes and misconceptions depicted in film, one is left to reflect on an observation of Schneider (1987): It is as if in the early 1900s filmmakers invented a new profession called “psychiatry,” where “From time to time the invented profession, through intent or coincidence, resembled the real profession of psychiatry, but for the most part it created its own nosology, treatment methods, theories, and practitioners” (p. 996).

The History of Psychologists in Film

The first movie to depict a psychiatrist was *Dr. Dippy's Sanitarium* (1906), while the first private, outpatient therapy sessions were depicted in D. W. Griffith's *The Criminal Hypnotist* (1909). In *Psychiatry and the Cinema*, Gabbard & Gabbard (1999) trace the portrayal of psychiatrists in films over the decades. They reflect a bifurcation of the field between 1906 and 1957, in which psychiatrists tended to be portrayed negatively as buffoons of questionable expertise or as positive, superior characters who made the impossible possible. The “Golden Age” of psychiatry is said to have occurred between 1957-1963 when most cinematic depictions portrayed psychiatrists (and other mental health care providers) as compassionate, effective therapists or talented crime-solvers (e.g., Simon Oakland's role as the wise and all-knowing psychiatrist in *Psycho* (1960). A “fall from grace” characterized the period 1963-1980 in which the psychiatrist again becomes a buffoon, sadist, or otherwise malevolent character. It is during this negative period when the “antipsychiatric film” emerged carrying the theme of the hero (typically a psychiatric patient) morally questioning and challenging the psychiatric institution or society and uncovering its flaws, usually at the expense of his or her own destruction (Krantz, 1988). *King of Hearts* (1966), *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), *Man Facing Southeast* (1986), and *House of Games* (1987) are good examples of this type of film. We believe the portrayal of mental health professionals in films since 1990 has shifted in the direction of being more positive and balanced as a whole.

Typologies and Stereotypes

Over the years, there have been many attempts to develop a typology for classifying the stereotypes of psychologists presented in films. Irving Schneider (1987) was one of the first to develop a typology for classifying psychiatrists in films, noting that about three-quarters of psychiatrists can be categorized into one of three cinematic stereotypes: Dr. Dippy, Dr. Wonderful, and Dr. Evil. Dr. Dippy is the zany psychiatrist who is crazier than his/her patients, Dr. Wonderful is humane, modest, and creative, and Dr. Evil is dangerous and subversive. Harriet Schultz builds upon these by adding Dr. Rigid, who stifles happiness and creativity and Dr. Line-Crosser, who is unable to keep secure patient-therapist boundaries (Sleek, 1998).

Glen Gabbard and Krin Gabbard subdivided the stereotypes into 10 core categories (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1992): The Libidinous Lecher (*What's New, Pussycat?*), The Eccentric Buffoon (*Bringing Up Baby*), The Unempathic Cold Fish (*The Deer Hunter*), The Rationalist Foil (*Poltergeist III*), The Repressive

Agent of Society (*Harold and Maude*), The Unfulfilled Woman (*Knock on Wood*), The Evil Mind Doctor (*When the Clouds Roll By*), The Vindictive Psychiatrist (*Dressed to Kill*), The Omniscient Detective (*Psycho*), and The Dramatic Healer (*The Snake Pit*).

A decade later, Wedding & Niemiec (2003) offered a thematic classification system, emphasizing the tendency of films to present psychologists as characters who could fit into one of the following sequences (current examples have been added with the classic examples): Learned and Authoritative (*K-Pax*, *Three Faces of Eve*); Arrogant and Ineffectual (*I Am Sam*, *What About Bob?*); Seductive and Unethical (*Bliss*, *Final Analysis*); Cold-hearted and Authoritarian (*Spider*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*); Passive and Apathetic (*Anything Else*, *Patch Adams*); Shrewd and Manipulative (*Vanilla Sky*, *Basic Instinct*); Dangerous and Omniscient (*Gothika*, *Silence of the Lambs*); and Motivating and Well-Intentioned (*Antwone Fisher*, *Good Will Hunting*).

In contrast, Coleman (1995) used a quantitative approach and examined the portrayal of 53 psychotherapists in 45 feature films between the years 1945 and 1994. She found psychotherapists were negatively portrayed in one of four ways: (1) Detached persons who are flawed yet transform through their interactions with clients, (2) Researchers whose projects harm others, (3) Persons who give in to their "shadow" and reap the consequences, (4) Minimally visible characters that remain unchanged throughout the film.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons

In the Norwegian film, *Elling* (2002), two of the main characters are released from a state hospital to transitional living and begin a new life in their own apartment under the occasional surveillance and support of a social worker. The social worker is portrayed as authoritative--someone who knows when to be tough and empowering and when to be understanding and flexible.

Rosen, Walter, Politis, & Shortland (1997) report a shift in Australian and New Zealand films to new messages of hope, resilience, rebellion, self-determination and triumph. Mentally ill characters increasingly are being portrayed in Australia and New Zealand as capable of expressing the full range of emotion. In contrast, mental health professionals have historically been portrayed as rigid, authoritarian, and dogmatic in New Zealand films, including Jane Campion's *Sweetie* (1989) and *An Angel at My Table* (1989), and Peter Jackson's cult classic, *Heavenly Creatures* (1994).

In the French film, *Mortal Transfer* (2001), a psychoanalyst falls asleep during sessions with his erotic, kleptomaniacal patient who is describing her sexual perversions. He awakens to find her dead on his couch, and he is left to deal with her body, her dangerous husband, and a complicated mix of what is real and what is unreal. Ignoring his legal and ethical responsibilities, he does not notify the authorities of the death. The film is full of psychoanalytic stereotypes—the therapist falling asleep, the patient lying on the couch, the emphasis on large sums of money required for psychoanalysis, and a patient who does most of the talking.

Despite the blatantly inappropriate behavior of the psychologist, the impact of the film is tempered by surrealism and the director's cinematic craft.

The emphasis is less on the psychoanalytic stereotypes and more focused on the complicated internal conflicts, sexual and aggressive impulses, and the nature of the unconscious. Moreover, the director leaves it up to the viewer to decide in the end as to whether everything that happened was a dream or reality as one of the characters symbolically throws away the “key to the mystery.”

In an article published more than half a century ago, Wolfenstein & Leites (1951) compared the portrayal of psychiatrists in American and British films. In American films, the “good” psychiatrist helps to free the hero from mistaken self-accusations while the “bad” psychiatrist works in the opposite direction. In contrast, in British films the psychiatrist is a father-figure likely to be portrayed as a tragic hero.

The Portrayal of Psychologists in Recent Films

Recent films of the last five years have depicted psychologists as motivating, well-intentioned, learned, authoritative, empathic, and compassionate. Moreover, these characters are shown to have their own struggles and vulnerabilities; we call these “balanced” portrayals. However, negative, less than flattering stereotypes continue to occur in contemporary cinema. These “unbalanced portrayals” depict one-dimensional, neutral, one-sided, and/or unethical therapists. Some of the dimensions on which films vary include the following: The psychologist’s therapeutic approach, including interventions/strategies employed; the level of boundaries the psychologist maintains; the psychologist’s personal vulnerabilities, in-session or out of session; and the patient’s progress, struggles, and growth.

Often times, psychologists are referred to in passing or shown on-screen only briefly. In some instances, this “flash” is a positive depiction of a knowledgeable professional, as in the pseudo-documentary, *A Mighty Wind* (2003), where a female psychiatrist makes her case in the treatment of a mentally ill patient. At other times, the brief depiction is stereotypical and lasts long enough for the “flash” to make an impression on the audience, as in *Mona Lisa Smile* (2004), where a psychoanalyst cheats on his wife with a college student.

Balanced Portrayals

Balanced depictions occur when psychologists are shown as human, but also as compassionate professionals who set boundaries, where they are motivating and insightful as well as authoritative and confident. In the last five years, several films have depicted mental health professionals with these abilities (*Antwone Fisher*, *Elling*, *Manic*, *Gothika*, *K-Pax*, and *The Sixth Sense*). In many cases, the psychologist’s “humanness” is accentuated in the depiction of their character as someone with personal limitations and flaws. Often it is their understanding of the need for growth in these areas and their self-transformation that becomes a crucial theme in the film, at times in response to the catalyst of their own patient’s example, inspiration, or motivation.

Antwone Fisher (2002) tells the real-life story of Antwone Fisher, a troubled and angry sailor who gets in fights and is sent to see a Navy psychiatrist. The therapeutic relationship develops and Antwone opens up, sharing his past abuse and trauma; he goes on a journey to make amends with

his past and finds the healing he needs. The psychiatrist, Jerome Davenport (Denzel Washington), takes an approach that is challenging, compassionate, understanding, and insightful, balanced by interventions that include confrontation, empathic listening, and practical, direct suggestions. He is open to discussing his personal life when asked, but usually sets appropriate limits on self-disclosure.

When Antwone initially resists treatment, refusing to talk, Davenport directs Antwone to attend the sessions anyway and offers him an opportunity to sit in silence through each session. This paradoxical strategy, emphasizing patience and understanding on the part of the therapist, gives Antwone the necessary space and time he needs to open up to someone for the first time. Davenport also uses bibliotherapy, as both an education tool to give Antwone insight into the abusive patterns of his past and their related cultural origins and influences, and as a guide to teach about the process of strength. He teaches Antwone the importance of channeling his anger in constructive ways, utilizes role-play to lessen the anxiety of a first date, and emphasizes the process of forgiveness and making amends with a painful and abusive past. Despite the positive impression overall, there are boundary violations that should not be overlooked—the psychologist conducts one therapy session in his own home, invites his patient to Thanksgiving dinner, digs into a traumatic memory in a community bathroom, and terminates therapy following this session.

The character of Jerome Davenport is shown appropriately admitting to mistakes he made in the therapy process, as when he discharged Antwone after three visits despite the obvious need for continued psychotherapy. Additionally, Davenport speaks of being “tongue tied” in his own early dating phases to normalize the anxious situation Antwone faced. In his personal life, Davenport struggles with a work addiction and a tendency to avoid his wife; his work with Antwone helps him become a better doctor and a better person.

In *Elling* (2002), the social worker’s balance between firm boundaries and compassionate understanding is probably the critical factor in the patients’ adaptation to supportive housing and realities of daily life following their hospitalization. The social worker (referred to as “Frank”) had a difficult task in working with two men with significant dependency characteristics: one an agoraphobic with schizoid traits, the other a naïve, at times explosive, man sexually obsessed with women. Frank showed patience in a role-play to help the former man, Elling, face his anxiety about answering the telephone, something Elling had never done; at the same time, Frank enforced boundaries by firmly reflecting reality to the two men, stating they must learn to become self-supporting or be sent back to the hospital. Frank’s true understanding as a mental health professional is revealed at the end when he spontaneously checks in on the two men and finds the previously agoraphobic, Elling, lying on the couch, hung-over, and having thrown up on himself. Elling, thinking he will be sent back to the hospital, becomes dejected. Instead, Frank affirms Elling’s assertive responses to his social challenges and his success at integrating into the community.

In *Manic* (2003), a psychiatrist on an adolescent ward (Don Cheadles) has his hands full during group therapy sessions with violently angry and intense youth (several with intermittent explosive disorder), as well as adolescents with significant self-injurious behavior and diagnoses of bipolar spectrum disorder and major depression. In an authoritarian environment, the psychiatrist maintains an authoritative approach. He is firm and compassionate with his boundary setting. He is inclusive of all members and asks a good mix of open- and closed-ended questions. He uses a slow, paced voice during most conflicts and demonstrates to all group members that he genuinely cares for their best interests.

In one particularly important scene, the psychiatrist asks the spiritual question, "What gives your life meaning?" Responses include protecting fellow gang members and playing play-station, which the psychiatrist appropriately reframes as "friendship" and "imagination," respectively. To the angry and hostile lead character, the psychiatrist comments, "Wherever you are going, you are still gonna be there" explaining that the adolescent is going to have to learn to live with his rage or end up killing himself or someone else along the way. The psychiatrist maintains his boundaries in an impressive way with one exception--when he throws a chair during an intense attempt to show a patient the reality and futility of violence and destructiveness. He is depicted with personal vulnerabilities, as he struggles to accept the usefulness of some of his interventions, questions and blames himself for a patient's relapse, and appears to medicate himself between sessions.

In *Gothika* (2004), Halle Berry plays Dr. Miranda Grey, a bright, competent, compassionate psychiatrist who honestly struggles with her schizophrenic patients in a woman's correctional facility. She learns the importance of listening more closely to her patients, trusting in them, and staying attuned to the often widening separation of roles that occurs between "doctor" and "patient." When an unexpected role reversal results in Dr. Grey becoming the patient, she is treated by another psychiatrist, played by Robert Downey, Jr. Downey's character is portrayed as someone who is professional, concerned, and willing to go to great lengths to help his patient. A third mental health professional in the film is the chief psychiatrist. Though not shown in any therapeutic role other than performing informal supervision with Dr. Grey, he turns out to be a psychopathic abductor, molester, and murderer.

In *K-Pax* (2001), Jeff Bridges does a commendable job portraying the hard-working chief psychiatrist (Dr. Powell) of a New York state mental institution. His role is much like that of a psychologist who performs individual therapy, follows daily patient needs, and performs psychotherapeutic interventions. Upon encountering Prot (Kevin Spacey), a patient who is not responding to medications, Dr. Powell accepts the case. Dr. Powell begins to spend all of his time and energy trying to understand Prot's history and psychological dynamics.

Dr. Powell is so focused on his job (and more specifically the healing and understanding of his patient) that he begins to neglect his family. He is shown as a flawed character, ignoring his wife (his second marriage) and neglecting his

children. His narcissism shows when he reminds his patients that he is “the doctor.” However, he also goes to extreme lengths to help his patient, traveling to Arizona to learn more about his patient’s family history. Despite these extremes, Dr. Powell is depicted as a competent provider.

As Prot begins to influence the patients by giving advice and interventions, the viewer is uncertain as to who is providing better service, the patient or the psychiatrist? In the end, the patient helps heal the other patients and also the therapist, and we see Dr. Powell spending quality time with his wife, appreciating his children, and re-uniting with his son who had been living in another state.

In *The Sixth Sense* (1999), it is not until the end of the film when the psychologist (Bruce Willis) becomes aware of and faces the ultimate vulnerability--his own mortality. Meanwhile, he is able to establish a good therapeutic alliance with a young boy (Haley Joel Osment) who claims to be seeing “dead people.” The psychologist’s approach is characterized with good rapport-building, humor, creativity, and flexibility.

Unbalanced Portrayals

In *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), a true story, Russell Crowe plays the role of John Nash, a brilliant mathematician who is battling the delusions and hallucinations of schizophrenia. Dr. Rosen (Christopher Plummer) is a psychiatrist who is initially represented as an evil spy, someone trying to keep Nash from accomplishing his national security goals. His role soon shifts to that of an expert who is trying to help Nash understand his illness. Consistent with the time period, the interventions used are straightjackets, restraints, medications, and insulin-shock therapy. The hospital workers are shown as able-bodied drones all too ready to restrain and medicate.

The psychiatrist, though not emphasized in the film, is a critical character as he is the first to make an accurate diagnosis of schizophrenia and he then makes important decisions that affect Nash’s life. He admits Nash to a psychiatric hospital, perhaps saving his and others’ lives. His treatment plan brings Nash back into the community, and the film conveys the important message that people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia don’t have to be locked away in an institution or asylum. It accurately shows that a person with schizophrenia can be a significant contributor in the community. The psychiatrist maintains professional boundaries, though his personal life is not depicted and no vulnerabilities or struggles are apparent. The film presents a fair representation of a psychiatrist, although the character of Dr. Rosen remains one-dimensional.

Lantana (2001) is a collection of several characters’ stories that are interwoven and connected. One of these vignettes depicts a psychologist. The psychologist is initially shown as supportive, empathic, and helpful with her comments to the patients with whom she works. As the film progresses, her struggles become apparent. Her own issues (marital deterioration, poor communication in her marriage, and bereavement issues) begin to interfere with her work, and in therapy she becomes increasingly angry and opinionated, giving advice based on her own marital struggles. She begins to screen her thoughts less frequently. Although her frustration builds, she does remain ethical. As she

becomes unable to manage her own life we clearly begin to see the impact of her personal problems upon her work as a therapist. She does not take time to care for herself and experiences a brief psychotic break when walking down a crowded street, vehemently accosting a random passerby. Her poor judgment continues as she takes an exit and drives off the road unintentionally, allows herself to be picked up by a passing driver, jumps out of a moving truck, and then runs away from the driver, eventually falling to her death. Her taped psychotherapy sessions are then seized by the police. Though she was not unethical in creating the tapes, the public is reminded of how things can go wrong if they see a psychologist. This film's portrayal is a good example of how not facing one's personal problems can affect and negatively influence treatment.

In *Normal* (2003), Roy (Tom Wilkinson) admits he is "a woman trapped in a man's body" to his wife and a pastoral counselor during a counseling session. The counselor is unable to hold back his surprise and dismay and is observed throughout the film as taking a problem-solving approach, determined to "fix" the situation and help Roy overcome his "abnormality." He teaches Roy's wife appropriate Biblical quotes to use with her husband and reminds her that she is free to leave him.

In *Vanilla Sky* (2001), Kurt Russell plays a court-appointed psychologist hired to understand the dynamics of a character played by Tom Cruise. At the film's onset, we hear the psychologist off-screen telling the patient that not all psychologists interpret dreams after the patient asks about the meaning of his dream of running through an abandoned New York City. The psychologist is depicted as intelligent, confident, analytical, and as someone trained to help the patient explore his past. The patient opens up as he is challenged. Upon getting the information he needs, the psychologist abandons the patient, saying their time is up. This abrupt ending to the session seems unemotional and inhumane as the therapist leaves the session without summary, support, advice, or care.

Also noteworthy is that the patient has a mask on his face while speaking to his psychologist. This cinematically symbolizes the lack of closeness in the doctor-patient relationship and the inability of the psychologist to establish a genuine relationship with his patient. The environment in which therapy occurs is dark and dreary, similar to a jail cell, with only shimmers of light. This setting adds to the confusion, hopelessness, and disconnection that the patient experiences in therapy.

The plot progresses, but the relationship does not. The psychologist is shown to be "unreal" and only a part of the patient's lucid dream. Although the psychologist supports the patient through his search for the truth, he eventually lies to his patient. The psychologist is caught in his deceit, and his role is shifted to that of the "fool," a character who is ultimately outsmarted and defeated.

The film *I Am Sam* (2001) depicts a psychologist in the role of psychometrist and expert witness. The psychologist is shown conducting an interview and later presenting her findings in court. During the assessment process, the psychologist uses complicated psychological jargon to the mentally retarded character, Sam (Sean Penn). The psychologist is portrayed as unaware, unfeeling, and remote. She seems unable to express herself in

straightforward terms, instead taking refuge in professional jargon to describe and label.

When on the stand as an expert witness, the psychologist is referred to as “Miss Davis,” minimizing her professional status. Her chaotic personal life is explored as she is cross-examined; when this occurs, she breaks down in tears, being depicted as a weak, unstable, and incompetent professional.

How Do We Address Stereotypes of Our Profession?

Perhaps the easiest way to increase public awareness of stereotypes in movies and other media is through educating our patients, colleagues, and the public. Psychologists can educate through informal discussions, as well as through the use of public lectures to point out which films have accurate or inaccurate portrayals. Just as there are various groups and committees formed to raise public awareness of the stigma of mental illness and particular disorders, psychologists can establish committees and task forces to address the stigmatization of mental health professionals. An APA group, Media Watch, was initially developed by APA Division 46 (Media) and was formed specifically to evaluate how mental health professionals are portrayed in movies, television, and literature and to educate the public about what constitutes ethical and competent therapist behavior.

Psychologists as Technical Advisors

It is becoming much more common for film directors/producers to hire psychologists as “technical advisors” or consultants. Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* (1945) was among the first films to employ a psychiatrist as a technical advisor; this film is grounded in psychoanalytic theory, and Hitchcock was concerned with the accurate depiction of both dreams and psychoanalysis. Several more recent films have utilized psychologists as technical advisors; these include *Silent Fall* (1994), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *K-Pax* (2001), *Analyze That* (2002), and *Antwone Fisher* (2002).

Marianne Gillow, a psychopharmacologist and technical advisor for *A Beautiful Mind*, estimates that 90% of her film consulting work is devoted to the pre-production phase of a given film, 5% in the production phase, and 5% in the post-production phase. She emphasizes that her most important task is to create a good working relationship with the director (Gillow, M., personal communication, April 2004).

In pre-production, a psychologist might help to create props for a film, assist with creating a patient chart or realistic therapy progress notes, provide an appropriate reading list for directors and actors interested in learning more about particular psychiatric conditions, and recommend films representing accurate and inaccurate depictions of psychologists. Stephen Sands, a psychologist and technical advisor for *Analyze That* (2002), helped reconstruct items from the Rorschach and Block Design subtest of the Wechsler scales to ensure that the film didn’t violate copyright laws (Sands, S., personal communication, March 2004).

Another important pre-production role for psychologists is working with screenwriters prior to the development and signing of film contracts. This allows

for more freedom and openness for script revisions. The psychologist stigma issues, or modify the screenplay so it is both accurate and entertaining.

Roland Atkinson is a psychiatry professor who frequently writes about psychology and the movies. Roland advises student and professional scriptwriters on creating authentic portrayals of psychiatric and substance use disorders and their treatment. He works through a *pro bono* program sponsored by the Entertainment Industries Council, a non-profit, Hollywood-based organization supported by the commercial film and television industries.

Psychologists as Actors and Set Consultants

Several films have cast real psychologists to play roles as film psychologists. For example, psychiatrist Herbert Spiegel appeared in *Taking Off* (1971). Interestingly, the role of the psychiatrist in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) was played by Dean Kent Brooks, M.D., a *bona fide* psychiatrist who was serving as the head of the Oregon State Hospital in 1975 when the movie was filmed there. Director Paul Mazursky frequently cast therapists in his films, such as psychiatrist Donald Muhich in *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* (1969), *Blume in Love* (1973), and *Willie and Phil* (1980).

A psychologist consulting as a technical advisor can help ensure accuracy of sets, and he or she can help actors and actresses understand the details of their character. Psychologists may also play an important role in setting up and executing a particular shot or scene. Psychologists can help to train the actor or actress to create an accurate portrayal of psychologists, including instruction on how to conduct a therapy session, verbal expression, body language, proper interpretations, and timing of interventions. Sands emphasizes finding a balance between “entertainment value” and “psychological integrity” in his film consulting. In addition to counseling Robert DeNiro on creating an accurate portrayal of an agoraphobic with panic attacks, Sands helped Billy Crystal identify and use appropriate verbal and nonverbal expressions that might be used by a therapist.

Summary

In general, we believe the portrayal of psychologists in movies is becoming more accurate and balanced. Although stereotypes are inevitable, there are many ways we can address cinematic distortions and misrepresentations, both directly and indirectly. Nevertheless, it is important to remember a line from Gabbard & Gabbard (1992), who state: “The only thing worse than being portrayed in movies negatively is not being portrayed in movies at all” (p. 126).

Author Notes

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