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Mental Illness: An Ideology Stigmatized by Media

 Ideologies play an important role in how societies function. Scholar, Stuart Hall, explains how they “provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” through “images, concepts and premises” (81).

He doesn’t stop there, however, he goes further to clarify that “ideologies are not the product of individual consciousness or intention. Rather we formulate our intentions *within ideology*” (81). In other words, we do not purposefully construct what constitutes a section of an ideology; ideology actually constructs sections of our social consciousness for us. Hall also notes that “ideologies tend to disappear from view into the taken-for-granted ‘naturalized’ world of common sense” (82), this holds true for the ideology behind mental illness too.

 Mental illness is stigmatized because of its ideology circulated through the media. In this context, stigma is described by Marie A. Yeh, Robert D. Jewell, and Veronica L. Thomas, as the “personal attributes that convey undesirable characteristics” (98). Yiyi Yang, Lu Tang, and Bijie Bie have done extensive research in this area too, claiming media such as “television dramas and films have… been found to depict people with mental illnesses as violent and unpredictable” (794). Media often attempts to use mental illness as a way to explain violent, erratic behaviour, which is unfortunate because in society, platforms such as “magazines are a trusted source of general health information” (Yang et al. 794). It is easy to look at instances such as the “selective coverage of violent crimes committed by people with schizophrenia [and use that information towards the] stigma of mental illnesses as a whole”, despite the fact that only “a small percentage of people with mental illnesses are connected to violent crimes” (Yang et al. 794).When a horrific crime is committed by someone with mental illness, the media often highlights what makes the person different. The media uses mental illness as a means to distance society from violence we believe we, or the people like us, would not commit. According to Yang et al., “men with schizophrenia generally experience earlier onset symptoms” (795). In media, men with schizophrenia are often portrayed as predominantly “violent and unpredictable” (Yang et al. 794). In *A Beautiful Mind* directed by Ron Howard, John Nash, a genius mathematician, progressively succumbs to the symptoms of schizophrenia. He becomes more and more characterized by his unpredictability, to the point where he eventually appears capable of violence.

 Despite the condemning nature, it is important to look for ways to reduce it, because “many who suffer from mental illness never seek treatment because of [the] stigma” (Yeh et al. 97). This may prove difficult however, because ideologies are, as Hall claims, “not the product of individual consciousness or intention” (81). Yeh et al. offers a solution nonetheless, arguing that “we need to conduct more research to identify specific segments of people who engage differentially in the stigmatization process” (98). Rather than trying to understand people with mental illness, we need to try to understand those without it. We must look at those who do the stigmatizing and attempt to understand the “cognitions and beliefs that compromise the lay theories that lead to the development of mental-illness stigma” (Yeh et al. 98). Focussing on reducing stigma by looking at those effected only furthers the stigma. Those who stigmatize are the real problem that we must evaluate and “create messages that specifically address those aspects rather than employing general messages for general audiences” (Yeh et al. 98).

 Media, through ideology, stigmatizes mental illness by “constructing and spreading misperceptions and stereotypes” (Yang et al. 794). Those who suffer from mental illness are often depicted as “violent and unpredictable” because the entertainment industry portrays them that way or, when a crime is committed, “the news media are more likely to report such news headlines” (Yang et al. 794). To reduce this malicious stigma, we must focus on the people who do the stigmatizing and direct anti-stigma messages towards them, rather than targeting the general public as a whole.

Works Cited

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