The Impact of Feature Films on Perceptions of People with Mental Disorders

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Abstract
Stigma associated with mental disorders is widespread and can produce additional obstacles for people with such conditions. Since mental disorders are often the topic of feature films, we wondered if watching these films has an effect on stigma about mental disorders. The present study was designed to test the effectiveness of showing a feature film in order to reduce mental disorder stigma. Participants completed a pre-survey, watched the film A Beautiful Mind, and completed a post-survey. Results revealed that exposure to the feature film did, in fact, decrease mental disorder stigma among our participants.

Method
Participants:
Pre-test: n = 96
- Gender (36% Male, 63% Female, 1% Undisclosed)
- Ethnicity (67% Caucasian, 16% African American, 8% Hispanic, and 9% Other)
Post-test: n = 47
- Film Exposure
  - Entire film: n = 22
  - Half of film: n = 25 (were excluded from analyses)
  - None: n = 8 (were excluded from analyses)
- Gender (38% Male, 62% Female)
- Ethnicity (70% Caucasian, 14% African American, 8% Hispanic, and 8% Other)

Materials:
Attitudes about Mental Illness Inventory (Kotch, Dikor, & Chapman, 2009). This 11-item scale contained statements about people with mental illness. Participants rated their agreement with statements such as “I believe people with mental illness are a danger to others,” and “Treatment can help people with mental illness lead normal lives.” Participants responded to these Likert-type items on a 1 (Totally Disagree) to 5 (Totally agree) scale.

Demographic survey included questions such as age, ethnicity, and whether any family or friends have been diagnosed with mental disorders.

TIPI (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). The TIPI is a 10-item measure of the Big Five (or Five-Factor Model) personality dimensions. Participants rated how well items represented their personality, and whether they agreed or disagreed with them. Internal consistency was high for all subscales.

Procedure:
Pre-test: Participants were invited through email to participate in an online research study for one bonus point in their Introductory Psychology course. After clicking the link to participate, participants read and electronically signed an informed consent form. Next, the participants completed the Attitudes about Mental Illness Inventory, the Demographics survey, and the TIPI.

Film exposure: A Beautiful Mind was shown in a theater setting.

Post-test: Two weeks later, participants were again invited through email to participate in an online research study. After clicking the link to participate, participants read and electronically signed an informed consent form. Next, the participants completed the Attitudes About Mental Illness Inventory. Finally, participants read a debriefing statement explaining the experiment and were thanked for their participation.

Results
One-tailed paired samples t-tests for individual items on the Attitudes about Mental Illness Inventory, including only the participants who saw the entire film, showed significantly less stigma toward people with mental illness (PMMI) on the post-test after seeing “A Beautiful Mind” for the following items:

Discussion
- Exposure to a positive, accurate representation of a person with a mental disorder in a film has been shown to decrease mental disorder stigma (Anderson and Austin, 2012). Our results were in line with previous research and supported our first hypothesis. Participants who watched the entire feature film, A Beautiful Mind, had significantly less stigma towards PMMI than participants who did not see the film.
- We believe our results are both encouraging and worrisome. Mental disorders are often the topic of feature films, and the media plays an important role in facilitating mental disorder stigma (Maer, Gentile, Vogel, & Kaplan, 2014; Stuart, 2006). Therefore, it is up to the viewer to choose films that are good representations of mental disorders, and this is not always an easy task.
- Further research is needed to better understand the impact of feature films on stigma of people with mental disorders. It was surprisingly difficult to locate a measure of mental illness stigma with strong psychometric properties. Development of a “gold standard” measure of stigma would be a valuable line of future research.

References