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THE PORTRAYAL OF SCHIZOPHRENIA IN TELEVISION: AN EXPERIMENT ASSESSING HOW VIEWER ATTITUDES ARE AFFECTED

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Abstract

Portrayals of schizophrenia in the media have been found to be very negative in nature. This study is an attempt to take research in this area a step further by conducting an experiment measuring attitudes of viewers toward schizophrenia before and after viewing an episode of Law and Order: Special Victims Unit in which a man with schizophrenia is depicted as a dangerous sexual deviant. Participants were given a pretest, viewed the television show and then were given a post-test. The pre-test and pretest are identical and consist of questions from the Community Attitudes on Mental Illness (CAMI) scale and questions assessing views of dangerousness. The CAMI scale measures attitudes of benevolence, attitudes of authoritarianism, attitudes on social restrictiveness and community health ideologies. Attitudes shifted significantly in regards to dangerousness (p = .001) and community health ideologies (p = .031).

Brief Summary of Literature Review

* The media portray mental illness in an overwhelmingly negative fashion according to Wahl and Lefkowitz (1989) and several other scholars such as Angermeyer, Dietrich, Pott, and Matschinger (2005).
* People who have a mental illness are thought to look and behave bizarrely, are perceived almost exclusively in terms of their mental illness and not in other social roles that they may could fulfill competently, and are regarded as being incompetent and dependent on others (Stout, VIUegas and Jennings, 2004).
* According to Wahl and Lefkowitz (1989), the media are the public’s primary source of information on mental illness.
* According to Cook and Wright (1995), awareness and education on mental illness has increased due to the relatively recent shift from institutionalization to community-based care.
* Public education as well as client education have increased as a result of the implementation of rights for people with disabilities.
* The portrayal of mental illness in the media has been found to be mostly negative in nature, and the most common stereotype found among scholars is dangerous and unpredictable.
* When considering how the media’s portrayal of mental illness impacts and affects the attitudes of viewers, scholars seem to agree on one thing: the relationship between the portrayal of mental illness in the media and the impact these portrayals have on viewers is complex.
* Many of the authors reviewed in this chapter suggested that negative images of mental illness in the media can lead to people being wrongly educated on the subject.

Methodology: Experiment

* Experiment assessing whether or not participants’ attitudes are affected when viewing material depicting people with schizophrenia as dangerous.
* An experiment was chosen as the methodology for this study because experiments focus on causation and are appropriate for hypothesis testing (Babbie, 2008).
* This study is rooted in Bandura’s social cognitive theory.

79 participants were given a pretest, shown an episode of Law and Order: SVU, then given a post-test.

The pretest and post-test were compiled of questions from the CAMI scale (Taylor and Dear, 1981) in order to assess attitudes on schizophrenia before and after viewing the material. Questions assessing attitudes on danger were also included in the surveys.

* The stimulus episode portrays a man who has schizophrenia, when off his medication, rapes and nearly kills several little girls. Although showing the man as very dangerous due to his mental illness, it is important to note that the episode may evoke sympathy from the audience.

Roughly half of the 79 participants served as a control group and watched a different episode of Law and Order: SVU that did not portray mental illness whatsoever.

Quotes from the stimulus episode:

“I would consider this man to be very dangerous.”

“He’s not a pedophile, he’s a schizophrenic.”

Hypotheses

H1: Those who view the negative stimulus material that shows a person with schizophrenia will express more authoritarian attitudes toward people with schizophrenia compared to those who do not view the negative stimulus material.

H2: Those who view the negative stimulus material that shows a person with schizophrenia will express less benevolent attitudes toward people with schizophrenia compared to those who do not view the negative stimulus material.

H3: Those who view the negative stimulus material that shows a person with schizophrenia will express more social restrictiveness attitudes toward people with schizophrenia compared to those who do not view the negative stimulus material.

H4: Those who view the negative stimulus material that shows a person with schizophrenia will express more negative community health ideologies toward people with schizophrenia compared to those who do not view the negative stimulus material.

H5: Those who view the negative stimulus material that shows a person with schizophrenia will express attitudes that view people with schizophrenia as more dangerous compared to those who do not view the negative stimulus material.

Results

H1: Post manipulation checks showed the authoritarian scale to be unreliable. This hypothesis was not tested.

H2: Not supported—Results showed no significance.

H3: Post manipulation checks showed the social restrictiveness scale to be unreliable. This hypothesis was not tested.

H4: Supported—Respondents supported community-based care significantly less (p = .031) after viewing the episode that portrayed schizophrenia negatively.

H5: Supported—Respondents found people with schizophrenia as significantly (p = .001) more dangerous after watching the episode that portrayed schizophrenia negatively.

References


Studies have shown the public’s primary source of information on mental illness is mass media, specifically television.

The American Psychiatric Association (2000) defines schizophrenia as a “disorder that lasts for at least 6 months and includes at least 1 month of active-phase symptoms (i.e., two [or more] of the following: delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior, negative symptoms)” (p. 298).