Portrayal of People with a Psychiatric Disability by the Media[*]

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I. Introduction

IN 1990 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission of Australia conducted the first national inquiry into the human rights of people with a psychiatric disability. The report has become recognised as a landmark within Australia in the field of psychiatric disability.

Preliminary research undertaken by the Commission indicated that there was:

☐ Widespread ignorance about the nature and prevalence of psychiatric disability in the community;

☐ Widespread discrimination against people affected by psychiatric disability;

☐ Widespread misconceptions about the number of people with a psychiatric disability who are dangerous;

☐ A widespread belief that few people affected by psychiatric disability ever recover.

As one of the terms of reference the Commission investigated:

(a) any discrimination on the basis of mental illness in federal laws and programs;

(b) any discrimination in employment, occupation, accommodation or access to goods and services on the basis of mental illness;

(c) human rights in relation to institutional and non- institutional care and treatment of persons with mental illness.[1]

The commission found that a lack of relevant research in Australia relating to mental illness was a major impediment to their investigations. It is hoped that the present study on the media portrayal of people with a psychiatric disability goes some way towards redressing that situation.

The portrayal of people with disability in the media is an issue that has been raised in the society and by researchers in the disability field.[2] In recognition of the importance of imagery, the United Nations has produced recommendations for the portrayal of people with disabilities in the press.[3]

The aim of this research was to test hypotheses derived from the theory of Social Role Valorisation developed by Wol-

1. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission : *Human rights and mental illness; Report of the national inquiry into human right of people with a mental illness.* Canberra: Australian Government Public Service, Australia (1993).
2. Mc Gill, P.& Cummings, R. An analysis of the representation of people with mental handicaps in a British newspaper. *Mental Handicap Research,* 3(1), pp. 60-69 (1990).
3. *United Nations. Improving communications about people with disabilities.* New York: Department of Public Information (1982).

fensberger.[4] The study surveyed newspapers in Western Australia over a five year period evaluating all articles referring to selected groups in terms of whether the portrayal of the group was positive or negative, and if negative whether it reinforced prevailing negative stereotypes about the group.

Wolfensberger proposed that various groups in a culture are considered deviant by virtue of having one or more characteristics that are considered to be different, with these differences being viewed negatively by significant numbers of people in the society. As a result of this characterisation as deviant, the people in the group become devalued generally by the society and suffer considerable damage through processes such as rejection, institutionalisation, physical and social discontinuity, denial of rights, physical abuse and even risk to life.

Wolfensberger argues that groups considered to be deviant are stereotyped with negative characteristics and these stereotypes are transmitted and reinforced by imagery. Several specific stereotyped roles for devalued groups have been proposed by Wolfensberger: such as object of ridicule, menace, sick or diseased person. From watching media portrayal of devalued people over time, one additional role seemed to be occurring frequently: the portrayal of particular groups as being vulnerable to physical attack. If this portrayal of people is being used then it could increase the fear of particular groups leading them to take refuge in institutions, as well as encourage individuals in society to carry out such abuse. *"Granny*

bashing" might be a manifestation of such a trend. Consequently, an additional category of *"Victim"* was added to the list, as well as an *"Other"* category to pick up negative portrayals that did not fit into any of the pre-determined roles.

Wolfensberger & Thomas[5] also suggest that people in one devalued group will tend to be associated with other devalued groups, so the negative stereotypes of one group may transfer to another. For example, if people with psychiatric disability are associated with people with intellectual disability[6], then the people with an intellectual disability may pick up stereotypes such as dangerous, diseased or unpredictable and the people with a psychiatric disability may be seen as incompetent and worthless.

One major medium by which people in the society are portrayed is through language and imagery in the press. From Wolfensberger's theory of Social Role Valorisation, it could be predicted that in newspapers, people considered to be deviant in the society would be portrayed negatively and articles about them would tend to reinforce the role stereotypes listed above. Groups of devalued people would tend to be linked in media articles and overall the portrayal of devalued groups would be mainly negative. This study was designed to test these hypotheses.

II. Method

Articles were selected from four newspapers published in Western Australia. A total of over 8 months of data were collected. Six and a half months of samples were taken in 1989/1990, with two follow-up samples of one month in 1991 and 1993. The follow-up samples were taken to minimise the possibility of bias due to a particular group coincidentally receiving prominent media attention at the time of the sample.

Articles were collected for 16 groups of

4. Wolfensberger, W. *A Brief Introduction to Social Valorisation as a High-Order Concept for Structuring Human Services.* Syracuse NY: Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agentry (Syracuse University) N.Y. (U.S.A.) (1991).
5. Wolfensberger, W. & Thomas,S. (1983). PASSING: *Program Analysis of Service systems' Implementation of Normalisation Goals.* Ontario: National Institute on Mental Retardation.
6. *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission* (1993).

people that were considered likely to be devalued by the media (see Table 1). Only articles involving people with a psychiatric disability are covered in detail here.

Table 1 :
Groups surveyed and defined roles rated in the analysis of newspapers

Groups surveyed

Aboriginal people

People with AIDS

People with visual impairments

Convicted prisoners

People with hearing impairments

Elderly people

People classified as homosexual

People with an intellectual disability

Migrants

People with other handicaps

People in poverty

People with a mental illness

"Street kids"

Unemployed

Defined roles

Sub-human (Pre-human, no longer human, animal, vegetable, inanimate object)

Menace

Object of ridicule

Object of pity/charity

Child (Eternal child, child once again)

Sick/Diseased

Dying/Dead

Victim of physical abuse

Other

Positive

7. *Ibid.*

III. Results and discussion

People with psychiatric disabilities were mentioned in 8.7% of the articles. Table 2 shows the percentage of articles that were scored in each role category. This shows that the role of *"Object Of Pity Or Charity"* was the most common, with 89% of articles rated as using language associated with this role. The next most common role was *"Menace"*, with nearly 2 out of every 3 articles. The role of *"Sick"*, *"Dying"*, and *"Victim Of Physical Abuse"* also figured prominently. Overall, more than 90% of the articles were found to be negative.

Table 2 :
Percentage of all articles that portrayed devalued groups in particular roles

(Percentages add to more than 100% due to groups being included in more than one negative role).

Role Category	Percentage
Pity-charity	89%
Menace	63%
Sick	47%
Dying	44%
Victim	18%
Other	9%

Table 3 shows the percentage of articles mentioning people with a psychiatric disability that also mentioned other groups. Nearly one in four articles mentioning people with a psychiatric disability associated them with people convicted with an offence. This is a particularly damaging association as criminals are one of the most devalued groups in society and people with a psychiatric disability are at high risk of being seen as dangerous and a menace to society.[7] Approximately one in ten articles associated people with a psychiatric disability with Aboriginals, people with AIDS, elderly people and pensioners.

Tables 3 :

Percentage of all articles on people with a psychiatric disability that mentioned particular devalued groups. (Percentages added to more than 100% due to more than one group being mentioned in individual articles)

Groups	Percentage
Criminal offenders	24%
People with AIDS	11%
Aboriginal people	10%
Elderly people	10%
Pensioners	9%
Unemployed people	7%
Physically handicapped	6%

When these data are considered overall, there is a strong connection being built up in the reader's mind between psychiatric disability and criminality as well as with several other devalued groups. On average, each article associated people with a psychiatric disability with more than one of these groups. While this link may well be unconscious, it would be surprising if it did not impact on stereotypes about people with a psychiatric disability.

For role attribution, Table 4 shows the major roles that people with a psychiatric disability are associated with in newspapers in *"Menace Or Object Of Dread"*, and *'Object Of Pity/Charity"*. Over half of the articles associated them with one or more of these roles.

Table 4 :

Percentage of articles associating people with a psychiatric disability with particular roles. (Percentages add to more than 100% due to groups being included in more than one negative role)

Role Category	Percentage
Menace	60%

Sick	60%
Pity	53%
Dying	33%
Victim	16%
Other	6%

While the roles of *"Sick"* and *"Object Of Pity/Charity"* could be considered as less damaging than *"Menace"*, they still place these people into a position of inferiority and in danger of losing control over their lives as others move in to 'help'. The role of *"Menace"* however is clearly very dangerous as it is likely to be used as a means to legitimise control and punishment. One in three articles associated people with a psychiatric disability with role of *"Dying"*, which meant that death was mentioned in the article. With death being a topic of avoidance in Western society, such an association reinforces the psychological distance of people with a psychiatric disability and could lead to them being considered worthless and 'as good as dead'. One in six articles associated people with a psychiatric disability with the role of *"Victim of Physical Abuse"*. This may reflect a reality for such people but when it is added to the very powerful role of *"Menace"* it could be seen to be justifiable. There were low rates of *"Sub-human"*, *"Object of Ridicule"* and *"Child"*. There were no articles about people with a psychiatric disability found to be free of negative role associations in the current study.

To be given the roles of menace, object of pity, burden of charity, sick and dying means that people with a psychiatric disability are not likely to be easily viewed as valued people to be taken seriously. It reinforces the stereotypes of people who are dangerous, incompetent and can be justifiably held from being participating members of the community. This finding ties directly into the report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission[8] that there are

8. *Ibid.*

"widespread misconceptions about the number of people with a mental illness who are dangerous". It is a reasonable inference that the associations being made through articles in the press are contributing to this significant abuse, denial of human right and general maltreatment of people with a psychiatric disability documented in the report.

Wolfensberger's hypothesis that devalued people are stereotyped in particular roles is supported by this study. All of the roles mentioned by Wolfensberger[9] were found in the newspapers with the exception of *"Alien"* which was not covered by the study. Also, the juxtaposing of different devalued groups was also found to be a frequent occurrence. While the roles of *"Child"* and *Object of Ridicule"* were infrequent, the fact that they occur at all is of considerable concern. One role not clearly identified by Wolfensberger but used in this study is the role of *"Victim of Physical Abuse"*. This in fact scored fifth in all attributions and was particularly significant for some groups such as elderly people. As such it is proposed as an additional role that could be added to those proposed by Wolfensberger. The very low proportion of articles of *"Other"* (2%), indicates that the roles proposed by Wol-

fensberger[10] plus *"Victims of Physical Abuse"* effectively cover all of the negative portrayals of devalued groups.

From these data, it is clear that there is a major problem with the way that newspapers portray devalued groups. With over 90% of articles placing devalued people in stereotyped roles, and all of the articles on people with a psychiatric disability, it is little wonder that the groups surveyed experience major difficulty in being included in valued positions in society.

People with psychiatric disability have suffered from an uncaring society for centuries. They have been burnt at the stakes as witches, exiled, incarcerated, and forced to undergo a range of "treatments" from torture to medically induced epileptic fits. A common thread running through this history is the denial of human rights and any degree of self determination. Could this have occurred without them being burdened with the stereotypes found in the research? It is our contention that the stereotypes are in fact the precursor to society's historical maltreatment of this group.

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9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*