Mental Illness in Disney Animated Films

Andrea Lawson, BA\textsuperscript{1} Gregory Fouts, PhD\textsuperscript{2}

Objective: To examine the prevalence of verbalizations about mental illness in the animated feature films of The Walt Disney Company (TWDC). We discuss the results within the context of children's repeated exposure to popular animated movies and their learning of labels and stereotypes associated with mental illness. We recommend further research on this topic.

Method: We coded 34 animated feature films produced by TWDC for mental illness references (for example, "crazy" or "nuts"). We developed a coding manual to systematize the content analysis, to ensure accuracy of the data, and to ascertain intercoder reliability.

Results: Most of the films (that is, 85\%) contain verbal references to mental illness, with an average of 4.6 references per film. The references were mainly used to set apart and denigrate the characters to whom they referred. Twenty-one percent of the principal characters were referred to as mentally ill. We discuss the contributions and limitations of the study.

Conclusions: The findings have implications for child viewers in terms of their potentially learning prejudicial attitudes and distancing behaviours toward individuals perceived as being mentally ill. To further verify this connection, an assessment of the incidence of Disney film exposure and attitudes toward people with a mental illness, using a sample of school-aged children, is needed.

(Can J Psychiatry 2004;49:310–314)

Information on author affiliations appears at the end of the article.

Clinical Implications

- Mental illness references have high frequency within animated Disney films.
- Exposure to animated Disney films has implications for child viewers who are learning stereotyped attitudes and stigmatizing terminology.
- More studies are required to determine the causal relation between exposure to Disney films and children's attitudes toward people with a mental illness.

Limitations

- We coded only verbal and written representations of mental illness. Thus, the number of characters referred to as mentally ill and the frequency of references to mental illness may be conservative.
- We coded the frequencies of references rather than the reference duration or the percentage of time that mental illness was portrayed on screen. The latter may have a greater impact on children's perceptions of mental illness.

Key Words: attitudes, mental illness, stereotypes, media, children
The effect on adults of the media's portrayal of mental illness and persons with mental illness has been extensively researched (1–6). The portrayals have been found to be overwhelmingly negative (5,7,8) and have been associated with adults' possessing negative attitudes and behaviours regarding mental illness and persons with a mental illness (2,4,5). However, little research has examined such representations in children's media and the possible effects on children.

Some studies have examined children's labels for and stereotypic attitudes about mental illness and persons with a mental illness (9–12). An important question is how children acquire these labels and attitudes, especially in the absence of direct exposure to mental illness in their everyday lives (13,14). One way may be through watching animated feature films in which characters are portrayed as mentally ill. In this study, we conducted a content analysis of the animated feature films watched in large numbers by young children.

The animated feature films of The Walt Disney Company (TWDC) (for example, Dumbo and Alice in Wonderland) are the focus of the study for 4 reasons: First, TWDC is the major world producer of full-length animated feature films viewed by children (15). Second, the greater length of feature films allows for the establishment of characters—something that is not always possible in shorter films or in television (TV) programs. Feature-length movies likely foster a greater sense of familiarity and identification with the characters, thereby creating a situation wherein the happenings, the emotions, and the potential lessons may have a greater impact on children, compared with any other medium. Third, most parents take their children to see Disney movies and rent or purchase Disney videos and DVDs. This has resulted in movies such as Snow White and Cinderella becoming films of choice for contemporary children, creating a Disney audience that spans many generations. Multiple exposures to the films (especially in the context of parental involvement, approval, and enjoyment) likely increase the impact on children's knowledge and attitudes. Fourth, research examining the contents of Disney movies (for example, portrayals of sex and/or race) has found that such films present and often promote various stereotypes and legitimize social inequalities (15–18). Disney movies have not been analyzed for their presentation of characters as mentally ill.

Understanding the presentation of mental illness in children's movies is important for 3 reasons. First, numerous studies have shown that children's exposure to TV and movies influences attitudes toward a wide range of social groups, that is, the elderly (19), persons with a mental disability (20,21), and persons with obesity (22). Therefore, repeated exposure to depictions of mental illness in movies likely influences children's attitudes toward persons with a mental illness. Thus, children may learn labels referring to those with a mental illness (such as "crazy" or "nutty as a fruitcake"), potentially acquiring the negative connotations and stereotypes associated with such labels (for example, inferiority or dangerousness). It has been suggested that adults' stereotypical beliefs about mental illness may have originally been acquired through media exposure in childhood (6,23,24). Second, early exposure to characters stereotypically depicted as mentally ill could cause the vicarious induction of fear and anxiety in young viewers, resulting in unconscious social distancing from these individuals (6,11,12). Third, research has consistently demonstrated negative consequences associated with adults' stereotypical beliefs about mental illness and persons with a mental illness—for example, research showing stigmatization and discrimination against those with a mental illness (9,11,12) and public policy regarding mental health (25).

One study assesses the contents of children's media for its portrayal of mental illness (6). These researchers examined 46 different children's TV programs available in Britain during 1 complete week (60% of these were produced in the US), and they identified occasions wherein mental illness was talked about and (or) characters were verbally represented as mentally ill (for example, characters were defined as mentally ill when they were consistently referred to by other characters as having a mental illness). This study found that over 46% of the programs contained references to mental illness; 80% of these were in cartoons. The present study uses a similar methodology and extends that of Wilson and colleagues by examining another medium of animation (that is, full-length Disney feature films) for characters portrayed as mentally ill and by focusing only on verbal references. Researchers need to know the contents of movie presentations of mental illness before assessing the effects of such exposures on young children.

**Method**

TWDC produced 40 full-length animated feature films between 1937 and 2001. These films are defined as having a duration of at least 40 to 45 minutes and as having been released into theatres (26). All such films were included in the study, except for those without one consistent story line from start to finish (for example, Fantasia, Fantasia 2000, Make Mine Music, and Melody Time), primarily educational films (for example, Saludos Amigos), and those not available on video during the coding period (for example, Atlantis). Thus, we analyzed a total of 34 films for content.

**Coding Manual**

We developed a coding manual to systematize the content analysis. The manual contained the variables coded, the operational definitions, the criteria for coding, and examples. During the manual development, we conducted several practice codings of the variables using non-Disney TV cartoons. We did this to ensure clarity of the variable definitions, the
examples, and the coding options. Several practice rounds and manual refinements were required to attain an acceptable level of intercoder agreement for each variable.

Below we describe the coding of each film. First, we coded film and character information, that is, film title, the year produced, and the name and sex of principal characters. Principal characters were defined as those around whom the film's action primarily revolved, those whose actions significantly influenced the plot, or those who were present on-screen for a significant portion of the film. Second, we coded mental illness as portrayed by the principal character, that is, all verbalizations about a principal character referring to mental illness, including verbalizations about a principal character by others or self-references by the principal character. An examination of the research literature (6,23) revealed 64 words referring to mental illness (for example, "crazy," "lunatic," and "nuts") and 37 phrases (for example, "out of one's mind" and "not in touch with reality"). The words and phrases were cast into a table with a number assigned to each. A coder recorded the number of the word or phrase and the frequency with which it occurred in the film. Third, we coded mental illness as portrayed by minor characters, to obtain a complete coding of all references to mental illness. We coded minor characters (including inanimate objects and groups), using a procedure identical to that used for principal characters. Here, however, minor characters were coded in total, rather than individually. For example, if a teacup character was referred to as "loony" and another minor character as "crazy," we recorded 2 instances of mental illness.

To ensure accuracy and interpretability of the data, we did not code comments about a particular situation (such as a "crazy" situation) and negations of a word or phrase (for example, "You're not crazy"). Included in coding were comments about a character's thoughts, ideas, actions, or clothing (such as "What's with the crazy get up?"). As well as written words (for example, "Looney Bin" appearing on a building). We included thoughts, ideas, actions, and clothing because these refer directly to a character's state of mind. Other characters, or the characters themselves, viewed these traits as irrational, illogical, inferior, unpredictable, and (or) lacking control. This coding is consistent with the use of mental illness words to refer to negative and potentially frightening characteristics of people.

**Coder Training and Reliability**

One researcher was the primary coder and coded all 34 films. To determine intercoder reliability, a second coder was trained. Training consisted of the reliability coder studying the manual, practicing with the researcher, and practicing with independent coding, using a sample of non-Disney TV cartoons. Training continued until both coders agreed on the interpretation of each variable and its criteria for coding. Once training was complete, the films were charted independently without further discussion.

The reliability coder indexed 10 (29%) of the 34 films. We determined intercoder reliability by correlating the scores between both coders in the 10 films. The correlation for the frequency of mental illness words or phrases across all the principal characters was $r = 0.96$ ($P < 0.001$); for the minor characters, it was $r = 0.99$ ($P < 0.001$). These correlations indicate high reliability.

**Results and Discussion**

Combining principal and minor characters, a total of 85% of Disney animated films contained references to characters with mental illness. More specifically, 21% of all principal characters were referred to as mentally ill (for instance, Maurice of *Beauty and the Beast*, Jafar of *Aladdin*, and Mrs Jumbo of *Dumbo*); there were no significant ($P > 0.10$) sex differences. These findings have 2 implications: First, the prevalence of verbal references to mental illness in animated films is considerably higher than that found in children's TV programs available in Britain (46%), including both nonverbal and verbal references (6). Second, prevalence of verbal references to mental illness in animated films is higher than the incidence of mental illness worldwide (9.5%) (27). Therefore, children who watch animated films of TWDC are exposed to a greater incidence of mental illness than is typically seen on TV and are exposed to a greater incidence of mental illness than they may experience in their everyday lives. Consequently, young children may acquire an unrealistic and stereotypic view of individuals with a mental illness in society, which could be exacerbated by their failure to distinguish between fiction and reality (28). It is unknown, however, whether this conclusion applies equally to British and North American children.

The average number of mental illness references per film was 4.6, with the 3 most prevalent words being (in descending order) "crazy," "mad" or "madness," and "nut" or "nutt"). These references were commonly employed to segregate, alienate, and denote the inferior status of the character(s) to which they referred—a finding consistent with the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of mental illness found in adult media (6–8). For example, in *Beauty and the Beast*, the townspeople frequently refer to the intellectuals Belle and her father, Maurice as mentally ill. Mental illness words are used to set apart and denigrate these characters, implying that to be mentally ill is to be different in a negative and inferior way. As the film progresses, the frequency of these words aimed at Maurice increases, climaxing in a scene where he will be chained and hauled off in a "lunacy wagon." The children watching could associate mental illness labels with people
who are so frightening and dangerous that they must be chained and locked away from the rest of society. This emotional association may result in increased fear of persons with a mental illness, increased worries of possible harm, and an increase in distancing and avoidance of contact. This is consistent with research indicating that children fear and distrust persons with mental illness and try to maintain their social distance from them (11,12).

Most of the characters referred to as mentally ill serve as objects of derision, fear, or amusement. In *The Lion King*, 3 characters (the hyenas) are depicted as being mentally ill, as evidenced by their rolling eyes, their high-pitched hysterical laughter, and the antics of Ed (the “craziest” of them all), who at one point mistakenly gnaws on his own leg. As the film progresses, it is clear that the hyenas represent the lowest social group in the animal kingdom and that they are to be feared and avoided. Thus, these “mentally ill” characters represent an animated example of being feared, socially distanced, and (or) alienated (1,11,12,29) as well as being laughable and laughed at—a trait that likely reinforces the previously modelled behaviour of social distancing. This combination of modelling and reinforcement is one of the most potent tools of socialization (30–32) and has the potential to teach prejudicial attitudes and distancing behaviours toward individuals perceived as being mentally ill. It has been suggested that, once these beliefs are formed, children continue them into adulthood (6,12,23,24).

In summary, young children who watch a range of Disney films during their formative years are consistently exposed to animated characters who are referred to or labelled as mentally ill, often several times within each film. This has several implications. Owing to the potency of repetition on children’s learning (33–35) and the denigrating nature of the references, young viewers may learn to label and stereotype others using this terminology, thinking it appropriate and funny. They may learn negative emotional responses (such as fear and derision) through the negative portrayals of the characters. The popularity of these full-length animated films and the ability of children to repeatedly view them (for example, in the home and often with parents) suggests that animated films may have more impact than TV programs.

We have 4 suggestions for future research. First, we suggest that analyses of movies and TV programs assess the behaviours (that is, verbal and physical aggression or discrimination) directed toward individuals labelled mentally ill. Such an analysis would present a picture of the modelling that children may subsequently imitate. Second, we suggest the emotional aspect of viewing content be addressed (that is, the emotional states of the characters doing the labelling as well as the reactions of those being labelled). This would provide information regarding the possible vicarious conditioning of emotional responses in young viewers. Third, we suggest the relation between media exposure and children’s attitudes and behaviours be assessed. Finally, we suggest that the relative contributions of various media (that is, movies, television, comic books, and video games) to children’s attitudes and behaviours regarding mental illness and persons with a mental illness be addressed.

**References**

24. Hodgkinson J. Disney’s return to Oz and ECT. Biol Psychiatry 1986;2:175–78.
Récupéré : La maladie mentale dans les films d'animation de Disney

Objectif : Examiner la prévalence des expressions verbales sur la maladie mentale dans les longs métrages d'animation de la compagnie Walt Disney (CWD). Nous présentons les résultats dans le contexte de l'exposition répétée des enfants à des films d'animation populaires et de leur apprentissage d'étiquettes et de stéréotypes associés à la maladie mentale. Nous proposons des recommandations pour de futures études.

Méthode : Nous avons codé 34 longs métrages d'animation produits par la CWD en ce qui concerne les mentions de la maladie mentale (par exemple, « fou » ou « dingue »). Nous avons élaboré un manuel de codage pour systématiser l'analyse du contenu, assurer l'exactitude des données et confirmer la fiabilité des intercodeurs.

Résultats : La plupart des films (soit 85%) contiennent des mentions verbales de la maladie mentale, la moyenne étant de 4,6 mentions par film. Les mentions étaient principalement utilisées pour isoler et dénigrer les personnages qu'elles concernaient. Vingt et un pour cent des personnages principaux étaient désignés de malades mentaux. Nous présentons les contributions et les limites de l'étude.

Conclusions : Les résultats ont des implications pour les enfants spectateurs dans ce qui concerne leur apprentissage éventuel de préjugés et de mises à distance émotionnelle à l'endroit de personnes perçues comme étant malades mentales. Pour mieux vérifier ce lien, il faut une évaluation de l'incidence de l'exposition aux films de Disney et des attitudes envers les personnes souffrant de maladie mentale à l'aide d'un échantillon d'enfants d'âge scolaire.