

## Accuracy of the Depiction of Mental Illness and Recommended Therapies In Popular Television Series

This study applied the DSM-IV-TR criteria in evaluating the accuracy of 3 television depictions of mental illness. Each of the character's treatment plans were also evaluated using the efficacy of each treatment as reported in a recent abnormal psychology text. These analyses indicated that all 3 series are accurate in depicting the symptoms of mental disorders by the treatments for these disorders were not consistent with a basic knowledge of abnormal psychology.

**Objective:** It has been acknowledged that the media is the public's single most central source of information about mental illness (Diefenbach, 1997). The goal of this study was to evaluate the accuracy of the portrayal of mental disorders and associated treatments in three current popular television series.

**Method:** The three television series were selected from the listing of the major television networks' top programs by month and because each included a character with mental illness. The HBO's series, *The Sopranos*, NBC's series *ER*, and USA's series, *Monk* were selected. In each of the series the portrayed mental disorder was stated, by diagnostic category in the program script. In the series, *The Sopranos*, Tony Soprano is portrayed as having panic disorder without agoraphobia. The *ER* series is noted for the character of Maggie Wyczenski suffering with Bipolar I Disorder. The character of Adrian Monk is depicted as having Obsessive Compulsive Disorder in the series, *Monk*. The analysis was based on an entire single season for *The Sopranos and Monk*. Conversely, *ER's* analysis was conducted on specific episodes in which the character of interest was featured. The DSM-IV TR criterion was applied for the assessment of each of the portrayed character's mental illnesses in each series. Specific behavioral characteristics supporting or contradicting each diagnosis were recorded for each character. Each portrayed diagnosis was vigilantly considered against possible related diagnoses and/or differential diagnoses in the DSM-IV TR to ensure accuracy. The evaluation of the treatments for these portrayed disorders was then assessed through comparisons with recommendations of a current abnormal psychology text (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004).

**Results:** According to the DSM-IV TR, each character met the diagnostic criteria for their stated disorder. The portrayal of mental disorder in each of the three series were defined an identified accurately. However, major inaccuracies were found in treatment approached for each of the disorders portrayed. He is undergoing Freudian therapy twice a week for the past four years. The treatment of *ER's* character of Maggie Wyczenski for Bipolar I disorder was not optimal according to recent research results. Maggie's treatment was a prescription of a mood stabilizer and Prozac yet no counseling or therapy sessions were discussed. In the *Monk* series, Adrian Monk is portrayed as having Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Adrian treatment is therapy once a week concentrating on childhood experiences. There are no proactive approaches discussed in his therapy and medication is not discussed. Behavioral therapies, specifically cognitive behavior therapy is also no considered.

Specific observations of each character's behaviors and therapy will be discussed in the poster. The "TV therapy" will be contrasted with research-based therapy approached for each disorder.

Conclusion: The findings of the study indicate that all three television series portray mental disorders accurately according to the DSM-IV TR. However, the results of this study raise concerns about the depiction of psychological treatment. The TV writers are conceivably applying the DSM-IV in their scripts. However they appear to resort to outdated stereotypes in designing treatments for the characters. The TV portrayals of psychological disorders and treatment influence the opinions and beliefs of millions of Americans. This study documents important discrepancies in the accuracy of the information that the public is receiving.

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