Using the Media to Teach Disability Stereotypes

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Abstract: Arguably the most powerful purveyor of culture for the past 50 years in the United States has been the mass media. In this article I will present ways to use the media to engage students to observe and learn about stereotypes of people with disabilities.

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Introduction

We are literally bombarded daily by multiple forms of media, with the effect of perpetuating established cultural norms and at the same time, creating new ones. It would be almost impossible to teach about culture that is driven by well-established stereotypes in disability studies courses without using the mass media. The impact of media has grown extensively during the electronic information explosion of the past 20 years. News and information on any subject the imagination can produce is available literally in seconds with a few key strokes. Obviously, that offers potential for learning and teaching. It also has great potential for presenting inaccurate information that passes as truth. Ironically, the Internet is the fastest source for checking facts and data presented in other media and it can be a source of misinformation through stereotypes.

Purpose of Stereotypes

The media is using a tool created by society, stereotypes. If stereotypes are harmful why would we have them? The short answer is because it simplifies life. Stereotypes are based on schemas. A schema is a set of characteristics that describe a common event or group (Schneider, 2004). The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2008) defines schema as, "A mental codification of experience that includes a particular organized way of perceiving cognitively and responding to a complex situation or set of stimuli". When presenting this concept to students, examples are helpful. A good one that most students can relate to is camping. When we hear the word camping what comes to our mind? Students usually say "camp fires," "s'mores," "tents," "sleeping bags," and a few others. Another common schema is what happens when we go to a restaurant. We know that we will be approached by a greeter who will ask us certain questions such as, "How many?", "Smoking or non-smoking?", and "Table or booth?" Then, you will be asked to follow her. We know the drill. We do not have to ask what she means because we have a working schema about that situation.

It is easy to see how practical schemas lead to stereotypes. We hear characteristics linked to groups of people from the time that we can speak and understand language with little to no questioning of those pairings (Schneider, 2004). Therefore, unconscientiously we use the stereotypes that were based on common schemas about groups of people as if they are fact. They

serve to allow us to go through life more easily by using them as shorthand for information about people in those groups.

Students will sometimes argue that there are some positive stereotypes. The one most cited is, "Asian males are good in math." I argue that the characteristic is positive, but the stereotype is still harmful, as are all stereotypes because they paint everyone in the group with the same brush. What happens to Asian males who are not good in math? Would they have a difficult time dealing with the pressure and a sense of failure? Would they have a difficult time exploring other interests, such as art or literature? Stereotypes take away our individuality (Schneider, 2004).

Other examples can explain how stereotypes can lead to discrimination. If people who hold power over people's opportunities act on their stereotypes to exclude people, it is discrimination (Johnson, 2005). An example that I use is a woman who wants to be a plumber. She would probably need an apprenticeship with a union to learn the trade and get jobs. If the gatekeeper of the union acts on the stereotype that women cannot be plumbers, then she will be denied that opportunity. That's discrimination.

Stereotypes serve a purpose and will always be present, so how do we mitigate their harmful effects? Leading students through that discussion is very helpful in shaping their future beliefs and actions.

Reasons Media Use Stereotypes

There are at least two reasons that media use stereotypes. First, and perhaps the most powerful reason, is that they work for them. The media's job in the business world is to capture an audience to sell to advertisers (Busselle, 2001). Stereotypes help them do that. The Media Awareness Network (2008) states that:

> "Media stereotypes are inevitable, especially in the advertising, entertainment and news industries, which need as wide an audience as possible to quickly understand information. Stereotypes act like codes that give audiences a quick, common understanding of a person or group of people—usually relating to their class, ethnicity or race, gender, sexual orientation, social role or occupation."

In their attempt to "catch" an audience to sell to, advertisers use the most powerful "bait" that they have, stereotypes. In an analogy of a person fishing to catch fish, she is not concerned with the bait being good for the fish. As a matter of fact, most bait is made of hard plastic with big three-prong hooks. Obviously this is not good for the fish, but effective in catching them.

Second, most media producers, writers, editors, directors, and critics operate from their own vast stereotypes (Busselle, 2001). They have no way to see the world differently. The stereotypes seem real to all of us because they perpetuate the familiar. Therefore, there is little hope that the media will challenge stereotypes. And why should they? Is that their job? Are they businesses protecting their bottom line, as do all businesses or do they have a greater

responsibility to society due to their tremendous power and constant presence? These are great discussion and essay test questions for the class.

Teaching Stereotypes

First, one must define the term stereotype and show the students how using them affects people. One simple technique is to define stereotype, prejudice and discrimination, then show how these harmful attitudes and actions come from stereotypes. Everyone is familiar with stereotypes, therefore I have the students in disability studies courses list common stereotypes about women and then men. They quickly personalize the concepts by identifying those that they believe about those two groups.

Second, one exposes the students to stereotypes and deviant roles about people with disabilities identified by scholars in their research. I use three sources: (a) Douglas' five strategies that societies use to deal with anomalies well summarized in Rosemarie Garland Thomson's book *Extraordinary Bodies* (Douglas as cited in Thomson, 1997), (b) Norden's ten stereotypes in movies from his book, *The Cinema of Isolation* (Norden, 1994), and (c) Wolfensberger's seven deviant roles, as listed in Condeluci's (1991) book, *Interdependence*. Although two of the three sources are not directly related to the media, they describe stereotypes that are pervasive in society. The media reflects society's attitudes and it is easy to see them through studying the media (Busselle, 2001).

Douglas' Strategies

As an anthropologist, Douglas (as cited in Thomson, 1997) identified strategies that cultures use to deal with anomalies or people in marginal groups. Social groups can reduce ambiguity by assigning the anomalous element to one absolute category or the other (e.g., African-Americans, people with disabilities, homosexuals). Stereotypes occur when people are lumped together into an absolute category because they lose their identity and individual rights.

Strategy 1

The social group will attempt to eliminate the anomalous group, e.g., the Nazis' euthanasia program, legalized sterilization, the eugenics movement of the 20th century, and currently, the euthanasia program pushed by the Princeton University bioethics philosophy professor Peter Singer (Demarco, 2008).

Strategy2

The dominant group will attempt to avoid the anomalous group, e.g., institutionalization and the "ugly" laws in U.S. In the later part of the 19th century, institutions were established to educate people with disabilities. When the Eugenics movement took over, people were put in institutions to protect society.

Strategy 3

The social group may label the anomalous group as dangerous, e.g., Lenny in *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1937), Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* (Melville, 1851), and Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* (Barrie, 1987). These are images and stereotypes that are seared in almost everyone's mind in our society from assignments in school to popular entertainment. One stereotype of people with mental illness is that they are dangerous. Characters such as these, and news reports about people pleading not guilty by reason of insanity and shooters in random crimes who have mental illness create and perpetuate this stereotype.

Strategy 4

Society may embrace the anomalous group and include them. This is the only positive strategy. Even Fortune 500 companies have embraced diversity in recent years because diversity improves business (Thomson, 1997).

Norden's Ten Stereotypes

Norden (1994) reviewed movies that have characters with disabilities from the earliest silent era through the mid-1990s and identified ten stereotypes that have been used by the movie industry.

Stereotype 1

The Civilian Superstar: a world class performer in such fields as sports, the arts, politics, and medicine who seldom allows his or her disability to interfere with career goals, e.g., the main characters in *Forrest Gump* (Finerman & Zemeckis, 1994) and *A Beautiful Mind* (Howard, Grazer, & Howard, 2001). Forrest Gump was unique in that he embodied several stereotypes at once. He was a civilian superstar because everything he did was successful, quite a feat for someone with an IQ of 72. He was also a sweet innocent and tragic victim. His character served as an effective hook to reel in the audience. The character, John Nash, in *A Beautiful Mind* was based on a real person by that name who is a Nobel Prize winning mathematician with schizophrenia. He was also a superstar because he was able to control his illness without medication. People watching the film might thus judge a person who needs medication more harshly.

Stereotype 2

The Comic Misadventurer: a person whose disability causes self-directed problems, other directed problems, or both (e.g., *See No Evil, Hear No Evil* Worth & Hiller, 1987) and *Mr. Magoo* (Myron & Tong, 1997). These are particularly harmful because they have nondisabled actors playing characters who are blind or deaf, stumbling around for the audience's amusement. That is inaccurate and demeaning. Our society stopped dressing white actors in black face to play over thirty years ago. One could not imagine that being done today.

Stereotype 3

The Elderly Dupe: an aged character, mostly limited to silent-era films, who because of a disability, usually blindness, is easily fooled by younger able-bodied types, (e.g., Isaac in *The Bible* (Laurentiis & Huston, 1966), the boy who is blind that was sold a dead parakeet in *Dumb and Dumber* (Wessler & Farrelly, 1994)). Most people know the Isaac story from the Bible, even if they have not seen the movie version. Isaac was the son of Abraham, who is believed to be the father of three major religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Therefore, passing his birthright to his eldest son is very important. Isaac has twin boys, with Esau being the oldest. When Isaac was about to die, he was blind. Jacob, the younger twin, came to him disguised as his older brother Esau. The ruse worked and Jacob became the heir to his lineage. In *Dumb and Dumber,* the character played by Jim Carrey sold a dead parakeet to a boy who was blind. The scene serves to get laughs at the expense of real people who are blind.

Stereotype 4

The High-Tech Guru: a wheelchair-using male who proves unusually adept at manipulating computers, communication consoles, and related paraphernalia. For example, Sam Hesselman, who was a wheelchair-using character who was able to enhance a photo of the alleged spy in the Pentagon and was killed in *No Way Out* (Ziskin & Donaldson, 1987). Sometimes, the character is blind, as in the case of the movie *Sneakers* (Parkes & Robinson, 1992).

Stereotype 5

The Noble Warrior: a war veteran with a disability, who made numerous appearances in movies immediately after World War I, World War II, and Vietnam. For example, Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July* (Ho & Stone, 1989), Luke Martin in *Coming Home* (Hellman & Ashby, 1978). Both were returning veterans from active duty in Vietnam with spinal cord injuries. Both became antiwar activists after returning home.

Stereotype 6

The Obsessive Avenger: a character, most often a doomed male, who does not rest until he has had his revenge on the person(s) responsible for disabling him and/or violating his moral code in some other way. The classic example is Captain Ahab in the book and movies *Moby Dick* (Melville, 1851). This is a common character, often done as a stereotype in movies, books, and plays.

Stereotype 7

The Saintly Sage: another elderly character, especially prevalent in the movies of the 1930s and 1940s, who despite blindness, can "see" things sighted people cannot and who dispenses much wisdom to his or her younger colleagues who ignore it at their own peril. A good example is the blind seer in the movie *O' Brother Where Art Thou?* (Coen & Coen, 2000). He is only in one short scene where he tells the main characters their fates. This exploits a myth about people who are blind having a "sixth sense" to replace their loss of sight. This is one more stereotype that people who are blind have to face that is reinforced by the media.

Stereotype 8

The Sweet Innocent: a child or young woman typically pure, godly, humble, asexual, and exceptionally pitiable, and who, often receives a "miracle cure." In the movie, *An Affair to Remember* (Wald & McCarey, 1957), the female character is hit by a car and becomes a paraplegic. She hides and will not contact the man she was supposed to meet because she does not want to be a burden to him. To the average person, this asexualizes women wheelchair-users.

Stereotype 9

The Techno Marvel: a person whose prosthesis or other equipment, often a high-tech device, frequently performs better than the limb, vision, or hearing it replaced. Many movies and television shows have this character, Darth Vader in *Star Wars* (Kurtz & Lucas, 1977), officer Alex Murphy in *Robocop* (Schmidt & Verhoeven, 1987), Steve Austin in *The Six Million Dollar Man* (Irving, 1993), and Jaime Sommers in *The Bionic Woman* (Bennett, 1976) to name a few.

Stereotype 10

The Tragic Victim: frequently a poverty-stricken social outcast, who expires by the film's end, if not earlier. This is probably the oldest and most over used of them all going back to Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* (Schmidt & Verhoeven, 1987) and reinforced over the years by telethons raising money for a cure (Norden, 1994).

Wolfensberger's Seven Deviant Roles

Wolfensberger, (as cited in Condeluci, 1991) as a sociologist, identified seven deviant roles that our society uses to marginalize people with disabilities.

Role 1

Menace: similar to above, but can include characters such as Lenny in *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1937). He was not seeking revenge, but his character is even more harmful because he does not appear to be dangerous. In the 1980s when group homes were being established for people who were developmentally disabled, they were in residential neighborhoods, but some neighbors filed lawsuits. One reason for wanting to keep group homes out of neighborhoods was that, "Those people are dangerous. They will hurt our kids." Most people are required to read *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, (1937) in high school, so it is possible that the book reinforces this stereotype.

Role 2

Object of Pity: the same as the "tragic victim," above.

Role 3

Sickness: similar to the "sweet innocent." The sick role is placed on people with disabilities in our society, which keeps expectations for success low. Sick people are not expected to do anything except get well.

Role 4

Object of Charity: usually because people with disabilities are seen as "tragic victims." Objects of charity have no power. They must accept whatever is given to them and be thankful.

Role 5

Object of Ridicule: similar to the "comic misadventure," but comes in many varieties from sitcoms to reality television.

Role 6

Eternal Child: similar to the "elderly dupe," but not age specific. Adults with obvious disabilities are talked down to and sometimes, literally patted on the head. Good examples in movies are the Carla Tate character in *The Other Sister* (Rose & Marshall, 1999), who was developmentally disabled and trying to get out on her own and have a relationship.

Role 7

Holy Innocent: similar to the "sweet innocent" with a religious twist (Condeluci, 1991).

Even a quick perusal reveals easy applications in the classroom from these three scholars' research with different disciplines. That lends itself to great in-class discussions and essay test questions. It quickly becomes clear to the students that society stereotypes people with disabilities in these ways.

After exposing the students to the stereotypes, I require them to use a form that I created called a Media Analysis Form (Appendix1). Using this form, forces students to recognize the stereotypes in media and to consider their effects on the audience, as well as real people with disabilities. The first job, and perhaps the most important one, is to help students "see" the stereotypes used in all forms of media. They have been socialized to think they are reality. Therefore, the stereotypes feel real to them and they do not "see" them. Students report that after using this form, they "see" the stereotypes long past the assignments for the class. That, of course, is the goal.

To start the students' discussion using the form, I show a few carefully chosen full-length movies in class. This is the primary reason that I always schedule my class for a three-hour session once a week. Movies that I have used are *Forrest Gump* (Finerman & Zemeckis, 1994), *Scent of a Woman* (Brest & Brest, 1992), *Extreme Measures* (Hurley & Apted, 1996), *Freaks* (Browning & Browning, 1932), *The Elephant Man* (Sanger & Lynch, 1980), *Gattaca* (De Vito & Niccol, 1997), *Born on the Fourth of July* (Ho & Stone, 1989), *At First Sight* (Cowen & Winkler, 1999), and *Murder Ball* (Mandel & Rubin, 2005). Themes that I present are cure, suicide, and

society's treatment of people with disabilities. *Extreme Measures* and *At First Sight* are opposites concerning cure and *Murder Ball* address cure as well. I show *Gattaca* and *Murder Ball* every semester because they address the issues of cure and empowerment.

These assignments lead up to a group media project. The class is capped at 40 students and every section is always full. I arbitrarily divide them into four groups and assign each group a media type. They are: (a) literature, (b) news, (c) movies, and (d) TV entertainment. Each student is required to analyze at least two pieces of work in her category using the Media Analysis Form. The group must analyze two time periods, before 1980 and after 1980. The movie, TV, and literature groups must analyze both children's and adult material. The news group must analyze all forms of news, print and electronic. The groups then present their findings to the class. One of the goals and effects of that assignment is to show them how stereotypes appear in all forms of media. The long-term effect of the course is that students identify stereotypes in all types of media in the future.

There are other sources that one can use to teach about stereotypes as well. Smart (2001) has a good discussion of stereotypes in her book, *Disability, Society and the Individual*. Charlton (1998) discusses the causes of the attitudes that our society has toward people with disabilities in his book, *Nothing About Us Without Us*. Although I only use a small portion of Thomson's (1997) book, *Extraordinary Bodies*, she goes into depth using classical literature to make her points.

Because media of all types are so invasive in our lives, and because it reflects, uses, and creates stereotypes that affect real people with disabilities in our society, it is an essential source for instruction.

Mr. Mitchell, M.Div., teaches Perspectives on Disability and Disability and Society at Washington State University. In all, he teaches 5 sections each semester totaling approximately 200 students. Mr. Mitchell has been a disability rights advocate for over 30 years and has served on numerous boards, commissions, and committees at the state and national level. He speaks at state and national conferences and other higher education institutions on disability rights and disability studies. He is currently a member of the Washington Governor's Committee on Disability Issues and Employment.

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Electronic and Print Medium

Media Analysis Form

Course Section

Name of work

Type of work

ID#   *Date reviewed*   /   /

1. Identify all characters that have disabilities and describe their disabilities.

2. If fiction, what purpose do the characters' disabilities serve? (For example, why did the writer make Forest Gump a slow learner?) If not fiction, for what purpose was the work made/written?

3. List and discuss all of the stereotypes that you identified in the work based on those discussed in The Cinema of Isolation and/or the deviant roles in Interdependence.

4. Does the portrayal of characters with disabilities and disability issues: 1) create stereotypes, 2) perpetuate stereotypes, or 3) confront or defy stereotypes? List the stereotypes and discuss your answer.

5. If the images of the characters with disabilities in this work were the ONLY ones the viewers/readers ever saw, would their perceptions of people with disabilities be more positive or negative? Discuss your answers.

6. If the images of the characters with disabilities in this work were the ONLY ones the viewers/readers ever saw, would their perceptions of people with disabilities be more positive or negative? Discuss your answer.

7. Are real people with disabilities in our society exploited by the portrayal of the characters with disabilities? Discuss your answer.