

Chapter 56

Violence: Mental Health, Family, and Media Reporting

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the extent to which journalists draw on long-standing mental health narratives when telling their stories about the “mentally ill” and, in particular, their tendency to depict the mentally ill as violent and dangerous. The chapter is divided into three sub-categories based on the perpetrators of violent crime committed against members of their immediate family. These were “fathers,” of which 24 articles were dedicated to the stories of 11 men; “mothers,” where 22 articles documented the stories of 24 mothers who harmed their children; and finally, “progeny,” where 58 articles presented 17 cases of sons or daughters who killed, or planned to kill, one or both of their parents. Despite differences in the way Australian journalists explain the violence depicted in these stories, particularly when the perpetrator was a female, they continually drew on mental health as an explanatory device to account for how and why these crimes took place. This provides evidence for a continuation of the confinement narrative presented in Chapter 1.

INTRODUCTION

The stories told in this chapter represent a continuation of the history of confining the mentally ill person, albeit in an invisible form presented in Chapter 1 of this text. In the years preceding the fifteenth century, the mentally ill were placed on boats and dumped on foreign lands. The seventeenth century saw institutions formerly built for lepers come to house the mentally ill and any other minority that threatened enlightened progress. The twentieth century witnessed the four-walls confinement of the asylum overtaken by the segregation of the doctor-patient relationship and medicalization. This chapter

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8544-3.ch056

illustrates the emergence of a complementary form of confinement – that of the stigmatized identity – reinforced through the telling of stories that use mental illness as an explanation for violent crime in the media. The purpose of this chapter is to assess the extent to which journalists draw on historically-derived mental health narratives when telling their stories about the mentally ill, and in particular, their tendency to depict the mentally ill as violent and dangerous. It is therefore a broad study focused on all types of mental disorder. Three cases involving fathers are presented followed by two cases involving mothers and four cases involving progeny. The chapter adopts Mindframe’s guidelines for mental health reporting that recommend using language that separates an individual from their experience of mental illness (Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2014). For example, describing a person as “having been diagnosed and treated for paranoid schizophrenia” is a more sensitive description than using the description “a paranoid schizophrenic”. The authors have chosen to preserve the use of the phrase “the mentally ill” when it has been used by the journalist whose reporting is the subject of examination.

BACKGROUND

Author and journalist Sonya Voumard (2016) wrote about the intricacies of constructing news stories in her work entitled *The Media and the Massacre*. She wrote the following in regard to how journalists can use accounts provided by interviewees:

As a journalist you want something out of a subject: good quotes, insights, preferably controversial material. You must strike a rapport, conversationally win over the subject ... Back at the office, the reality hits that journalism is an inexact science with great limitations. Variables like space, time, objectivity, editors and other points of view mean you can never guarantee that you will tell the exact story the subject wants told ... you reject what you don’t want, select and prioritize what you do.

Voumard’s argument offers insight into the reality of assembling newspaper articles for print or online publication. Most revealing is the statement “you reject what you don’t want, select and prioritize what you do”. The analysis presented in this chapter offers support for this practice, evidenced in the way the mental health explanatory narrative was used differently across the mothers and fathers samples. It is remarkable how often journalists chose to select and prioritize mental illness in stories of violent crime and murder, and this was most evident in those articles devoted to mothers who killed their children.

This chapter is about storytelling, and in particular, the extent to which Australian journalists draw on mental health narratives when they tell their stories about the mentally ill. As explained in Chapter One, these narratives have changed over time, but still operate today in both subtle and overt ways. The authors conduct an analysis of the way journalists draw on and inform these narratives using discourse and narrative analysis techniques. The articles included in the analysis were collected from eight hard-copy Australian newspapers sourced through Factiva. Factiva was used to source articles published between November 2000 and May 2015. The analysis sourced those pieces containing both search terms “mental illness” and “mentally ill”. Hard copy was chosen as it is considered a “trusted” source of news compared with online news mediums.

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