

Shamelessly Mentally Ill: A Content Analysis of the Showtime Series *Shameless*

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Final Paper

Dr. Romero

Department of Sociology

Introduction

In the United States, on average 90% of the US population will spend at least 4 hours a day in front of the television (NAMI 2017). In our society, television is one of our main sources of information and entertainment. And for that reason, television and the media can subconsciously affect the way we perceive things, and the way we view others in our society. Although people are switching from sitting in front of the TV, to using their smart phone or computers, the influence of the media remains the same.

When television is being watched, we often see reoccurring themes, one of which is mental illness. Mental illness is regularly portrayed inaccurately in the media. The mentally ill are shown as being violent, scary, and less-than human sometimes (Frankel 2015). Approximately 43.8 million adults in the United States will experience mental illness at any given time throughout a year. (NAMI 2017). This means that 1/5 of American adults who have a mental illness are being depicted negatively through TV shows we watch everyday (NAMI 2017).

For this reason, I will be analyzing the depictions of mental illness in a popular television series, *Shameless*. This is a highly entertaining and widely watched television series. With millions of people watching on cable, and online, their influence is tremendous.

It is human nature to take the things we observe, and draw personal opinions and conclusions from what we see. But we must be careful because the inaccurate messages sent to our society through the media have a stronger influence than we realize. This is why it is important that I analyze how the depictions of mental illness are depicted in the popular TV series, *Shameless*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In our society, the discussion of mental health has become less taboo over time due to people making an effort to inform others. As our society continues to become more aware of mental health and learning how to deal with mental illness, the research has also expanded. There are many studies out there that focus on the recovery stage, getting the right medications, and getting the support you need, but there is not a lot of research about how our everyday influences, such as television shows and the news, can affect our perception of mental illness. Mass media is embedded into our society now, and it is important that we understand how it affects our views on mental illness and how that leads to negative consequences.

Mental Health in Society

In our society, mental illness has not always been a subject we discuss openly like other health problems. When the discussion of mental health comes up, things can become tense and awkward people are not sure how to deal with it. Mental illness is a medical condition that affects 20% of people in the United States at any given time (Yeh 2017). So why in our society do we view sickness of the mind differently than we view a cold or a broken bone? “Individuals react to mental illness in this nonsensical way because they do not truly understand the gravity and complexity of living and treating it (Frankel 2015). Over the years, the lack of conversations about mental health have made as if it were not a priority in regards to health. In our society, it is acceptable to talk about a broken arm, but share with the room that you’re bipolar and you might get negative feedback.

Depictions of Mental Health in Media

As the topic of mental illness has become more prominent over time, it is begun to show up more frequently throughout the media. News media outlets and the entertainment industry are major contributors to how mental health is perceived. The films and television shows that have characters with a mental disorder rarely are shown in a positive light. In the academic journal, “Media and Madness”, Friedman (2008) explains how news media and the entertainment industry shape the public's opinion about mental illness. Friedman (2008) says, “Hollywood has also benefited from a long-standing and lurid fascination with psychiatric illness.” He goes on to say both industries “have a critical role to play” and “together and separately, they can either perpetuate the stigma and misunderstanding surrounding mental illnesses or they can work to enlighten and educate.” Similarly, Brown (2015) said, “it should not be up to the media industries to educate the public on mental health conditions but, on the other hand, they should not be irresponsible in their portrayals of them either. In our society today, the media has such a great impact because it is everywhere. Even the slightest miss-representation of mental health can alter someone's opinion. Hoffner (2017) referenced a poll from the United Kingdom where those who used mental health services believed that negative news reports about mental illness affected how others treated them.

Effectiveness/Attitudes/Stigma

The media's continuous inaccurate depiction of mental illness has negatively shaped society's view of the mentally ill and contributed to the stigma. The public's depiction of mental illness has been dominated by violence, isolation, loss, misery, homelessness, personal failure, and ineffective health and social services (Henson 2009). The influence of the media is almost

impossible to avoid. There have been frequent findings that suggest the exposure of television influences the reality of the viewer (Kimmerle 2013). Once that viewer sees one negative thing about mental illness, it is very likely they will see that reoccurring theme again on a different media outlet. Many of the academic journals I have previously referenced have used the Virginia Tech University shooting as an example of the media's continuous contribution to the stigma. The shooting was indeed a tragedy, but the news outlets focused on mental health of the gunman. His prior hospitalizations for his mental illness was brought up, along with prior isolation or odd behavior viewed by those around him. Even though the descriptions of the gunman's character may be true, the constant reminder that the gunman was mentally ill reinforces or creates the idea that all mentally ill people are violent. Studies have shown most media will pair mental illness with danger and violence (Friedman 2008.) Kimmerle (2013) suggest that not only will television shape attitudes about mental illness, but it will also form a basic level of knowledge from the mass media that is not true. It is very problematic that we have people gaining their knowledge of mental illness from television because there are very few realistic portrayals out there (Brown 2015).

Over time, there has been more acceptance and conversation about the importance of mental health. However, mass medias major influence on the way mental illness is viewed throughout our society is an ongoing social issue. The constant violent depictions of those with mental illness create misunderstanding, and that creates more stigma.

DATA AND METHODS

This study utilizes an unobtrusive method to analyze how mental illness is depicted in the American television show *Shameless*. I conducted a content analysis of 10 episodes of *Shameless*

that were released throughout the last eight seasons of the show. For the purpose of this study, I only focused on specific characters that were affected by a mental illness throughout the show.

I conducted a systematic analysis by collected data from 10 episodes of *Shameless* off the online streaming series, Netflix.

The television show *Shameless*, is a remake off the UK version of the show. *Shameless* made it is debut in 2011, and has continued to be filmed with the current season, season 8 being released November 5, 2017 and a set renewal for Season 9. The television show takes place in Chicago, with a chaos surrounding the Gallagher family. Frank Gallagher is known as the absent father figure who suffers from alcoholism and drug addiction, who often leaves his six children, to fend for their selves. During the season 7 premiere, *Shameless* had 1.86 millions viewers which was Showtime's highest rated series across the network. In addition, *Shameless* has four Primetime Emmy Awards, two Prism Awards, one BMI film & TV award, and one Screen Actor Guide Award.

I choose *Shameless* because it was a well-known, highly viewed television show that focused on different sociological issues. Poverty, gentrification, domestic abuse and mental illness are some of the prevalent social issues within the show. With the TV shows ratings continuously rising, their large platform can have a positive and, or negative affect on the way mental illness and the other sociological issues are viewed in our society.

There were some limitations within my study. I only analyzed two of the characters within the series, and there are others within the shows that do have mental illness as well. If I were to analyze the entire series, episode, by episode, I would have a more detailed analysis of how mental illness is depicted in the show.

ANALYSIS

For my analysis, I will examine how on Ian Gallagher and Frank Gallagher, display the following themes while dealing with their mental illness: 1) recklessness, 2) vulnerability, and 3) resilience.

Ian Gallagher

1) Recklessness

Ian Gallagher was diagnosed with bipolar disorder after having a several mental breakdowns. A change in Ian was noticed in episode three, season twelve after Ian walked into an army recruiting office, inquiring about joining active duty in the marines. The recruitment officer asked Ian a series of questions, that Ian already had answered prepared for. Ian eagerly asked the officer “When does the next bus leaving for basic training?” the officer responds “tomorrow morning.” Ian responds, “I’ll be there.” Before leaving the office, the officer tells Ian to “think it over,” and Ian responds, “I’m ready now.” Before leaving for basic training, the only person Ian tells is his ex-boyfriend. He does not mention to any of his family that he is leaving. Because Ian is not old enough to join the army, he steals his brothers ID, to get a fake one made with his picture on it.

In the season four opener, Ian is missing. No one knows where he is or if he’s safe. While Ian’s brother, Lip, is at school, Military officers come looking for him. The officers inform lip that someone has impersonated him, and then they held up a picture of Ian. “Do you know this man?” they ask Lip. Lip tells the officers he has no idea who that is or why he’d want to impersonate him. The officers tell Lip that that Ian went AWOL, tried to steal a helicopter, and ran away from base.

In the following episode, Ian's older brother, Lip, and his younger sister, Debbie, begin to look for him. They discover that Ian has been living in an abandoned house and working at a male strip club. Lip and Debbie find Ian at work that night, and it's obvious something is very wrong. Ian is excited to see them, but is almost uninterested in their presence. Lip asks Ian to come outside so they can talk, and Ian ignores his brother and walks off.

2) Vulnerability

Ian's reckless behavior only continues throughout the series. Ian becomes his most vulnerable self after he is admitted into the mental hospital for taking his boyfriend's baby and running away. After being placed in the mental hospital in season five, episode six, Ian still refuses to believe he has had bipolar disorder. During this scene, Ian shows no emotion but the pain is visible. These scenes are hard to watch. Ian is at his lowest point throughout the show. Before he signs over his rights to the hospital, he turns back to get a reassuring nod from his boyfriend.

3) Resilience

In the previous season Ian was at work bottom. But during season six of Shameless, Ian makes a complete 180 and starts to take steps toward a better future. He begins to date a firefighter, which inspires him to become an EMT. He regularly takes his medication, and has accepted the fact he has had bipolar disorder. Things start to look up for Ian.

Frank Gallagher

1) Recklessness

Frank Gallagher suffers from alcoholism and drug addiction throughout the entire series. His addictions always lead to reckless behavior. During the opening of season three, Debbie Gallagher is sitting in the front yard, leaving signs about her father along the fence. Fiona walks

outside and Debbie says, “One hundred and thirty-seven days.” Fiona nonchalantly responds with “When I was 9, he was gone for a year. He always comes back.” The sense switches, and Frank Gallagher is shown lying on a dirt road next to a building. As a stray dog licks Frank’s face, he wakes up confused about his surroundings. An officer then approaches Frank, taps him with his baton, and yells at him in Spanish. As Frank gets to his feet, he walks to the nearest street to see a parade happening. He then asks a nearby stranger “Where am I?” The stranger responds “Juarez,” and Frank in shock responds “Mexico? Did I miss Christmas?” and the stranger with a smile says, “You almost missed Easter.” Frank has no recollection of where he is, and he has no idea he has been gone away from home for 137 days.

It is never clearly stated how Frank ended up in Mexico, or why he was gone for 137 days, but one can conclude it was because he was drunk. A father of six, disappearing for almost 5 months, isn’t only reckless, it’s almost unfathomable. Frank often let his alcoholism get the best of him.

2) Vulnerability

An analysis of Episode 12, Season 7 displayed a very rare vulnerable side of Frank Gallagher. Monica Gallagher died of a brain aneurism that sent Frank into a downward spiral. After hearing about the death of Monica, Frank did what he knew best, and got drunk. Frank returned home that night, only to fall asleep on the floor, next to his throw up, with Monica’s shoe in his hand.

During his eulogy at Monica’s funeral, we are shown a softer, more fragile side of Frank. He cried as he talked about Monica, and how he shared his first line of cocaine with her. Drunk, and heartbroken, Frank tells his kids “And every time I look into one of your kids faces, I see her face looking back at me, smiling and laughing,” as tears ran down his face. Although Frank’s

alcoholism often made him in careless and selfish, a vulnerable side of him was shown in the show.

3) Resilience

During the season eight opener, Frank finally returns back to the Gallaher household after being gone for awhile and mourning the loss of his beloved wife Monica. In episode two, of season eight, Frank is shown in the kitchen, asking his kids for fashion advice for this job interview. His children are very uninterested, knowing that Frank hasn't a job in years. Frank assures his children by saying "This Frank is different." Somehow, Frank gets a job at a home improvement store, even though his resume is completely fabricated.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze how mental illness was depicted in the television series *Shameless*. Ten episodes released throughout the previous eight seasons were analyzed to discover reoccurring themes in characters with mental illness. For my analysis, a description of character behavior was given to support the following themes: 1) recklessness, 2) vulnerability, and 3) resilience.

The issue with the depictions of the mentally ill in media is that most of the examples given are over dramatized, inaccurate, and negative. Throughout the show, characters that had a mental illness were displayed as reckless. This is no new theme in television shows regarding the mentally ill. Characters in *Shameless* often ran away for extended periods of time, or had medical episodes. Although *Shameless* displayed the mentally ill as being reckless, the examples were not over dramatized and exaggerated. The examples given throughout the show were very real depictions of what mental illness could look like.

Vulnerability was a theme that occurred regarding the mental ill in *Shameless*. These vulnerable times were often shown after reckless behavior had been done. It was apparent the characters were struggling and trying to cope with things the best way they new how. This is not a common theme in shows about the mental ill, like recklessness. In the media, the mental ill can be portrayed as less than human and outcasts in our society. This can create social distance, and contribute to other health problems. Displaying characters in *Shameless* as vulnerable helped remind viewers that the mentally ill are human too. The examples of vulnerability in the show

Even though the characters had their ups and downs, resilience was still prevalent in the show. Each character worked through their illness, the best they could, with the resources available to them. The TV show *Shameless* displayed the rawness of mental illness and also speeded the positive ideas that having a mental illness doesn't ruin your life.

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