



“Psycho Bitches”: A Discourse Analysis of the Representation of Mentally Ill Women in Modern Film (2003-2014)

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**ABSTRACT**

In past research, it has been found that mental illness is depicted negatively in film and television, and that people often display stigmatising attitudes towards the mentally ill. Additionally, the knowledge that mental illness is often a gendered experience leads the researcher to ask how mentally ill women specifically are depicted in contemporary film (from the past 11 years). This research was done from a social constructionist point of view, using a mixture of discourse analysis, polytextual visual analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis to analyse the construction of mentally ill women in film. During the process of analysis, it was found that mentally ill women in contemporary film are depicted as crazy, troublemakers, powerless and infantilised. Therefore it was established that negative depictions of this group are still prevailing, albeit in a more insidious and inconspicuous manner than in the past. It is hoped that this research, as well as further research in this area will contribute towards a positive shift in depictions of mentally ill women in film in the future.

<b>KEY WORDS:</b>	<b>DISCOURSE ANALYSIS</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>MENTAL ILLNESS</b>	<b>FILM</b>	<b>SOCIAL CONSTRUCTI ONISM</b>
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## Introduction

In a survey conducted for the Office of National Statistics, it was found that in any given year, one in four people will experience a mental health problem (Singleton et al., 2003). Whilst mental illness is clearly a prevalent issue, much of our information on this topic comes from the media (Philo et al., 1994). This means it is probable that the general public's view of mental illness and the mentally ill is likely to be aligned with that of the media – be it positive or negative. The general learning model (Buckley and Anderson, 2006) supports this, as it argues that extensive exposure to stimuli leads to the development of 'knowledge structures', which guide our responses. In terms of the present research, this means that exposure to negative attitudes about the mentally ill in the media may also cause the audience to adopt this negative attitude. Since mental illness is so widespread, it is important that media depictions of the mentally ill are scrutinised to see if they are valid representations of this group of people.

Past research has found that television and film featuring mental illness has portrayed characters in a negative way (Signorielli, 1989; Noll-Zimmerman, 2003; Time to Change, 2006; Bullins, 2014). One widespread stereotype of the mentally ill is the 'violent mental patient'. One way the mentally ill are depicted as violent is by being represented as dangerous to themselves or others (Pavlovic, 2011). In Pavlovic's study of 40 films between 1964-2009, other attributions to mentally ill characters included 'unstable' and 'frightening'. Owen (2012) found that of the characters with schizophrenia that featured in films between 1990-2010, the majority displayed violent behaviour and one-third of these characters engaged in homicide. Similar findings have been discovered on television. In one study by Wilson et al. (1999), 15 of the 20 mentally ill characters analysed were depicted as physically violent.

'Screening Madness' (2009), a report by anti-stigma organisation Time to Change, studied mainstream cinema over a 64-year period and found four prevalent stereotypes of the mentally ill in their study. These were comedic, faking/indulgent, pity and violence. The 'violent' category is by far the largest. However, this study only includes films from 1942-2006 so is lacking in information about modern film, therefore the findings of this research may be out-dated and missing information about more contemporary stereotypes of the mentally ill. Additionally, the methodology behind this research is not stated in any way, as there is no mention of the sampling method used to choose the films chosen, so it is difficult to find this research reliable.

In reality, most violent crimes (including murder) are committed by those who are not mentally ill (Fazel, 2006). In fact, the mentally ill are "three times more likely to be a victim of crime than the general population" (Pettitt et al., 2013:18). It has been found that stereotypical views of the mentally ill as violent lead to stigmatising views of these people. Rose et al., (2007) investigated the perception of the mentally ill in students and found that the most frequently occurring terms were 'disturbed, nuts, confused, psycho, spastic, crazy', all words that could be a result of inaccurate media portrayals of mental illness. However, the sample was limited to 14 year olds so the research lacks information about other age groups. These attitudes towards the mentally ill are stigmatising. Goffman (1986:12) defines stigma as an attitude that reduces a person from a whole to a 'tainted, discounted one', based on the

possession of an attribute that makes him different in some way, which in this case is mental illness. Goffman contended that stigma ruins a person's identity, therefore it can be inferred that these negative stereotypes will have a sizeable impact on the mentally ill.

Other prevalent stereotypes in film and television include the 'narcissistic parasite' and 'female patient as seductress' (Hyler, 1991; Goodwin, 2013). This stereotype of the 'narcissistic parasite' as a self-centred attention seeker ridicules the mentally ill and makes their problems appear minor and trivial. The 'female patient as seductress' is equally as damaging; for women, their sexuality becomes pathologised as part of their mental illness instead of simply being rational desire. These depictions of mentally ill women as crazed nymphomaniacs may prevent women struggling with an undiagnosed mental illness from seeking help due to fear of being categorised this way.

Nevertheless, this negative depiction of the mentally ill in the media is not without exception. In the last few decades, there have been sympathetic portrayals such as *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *The Aviator* (2004) and *Girl, Interrupted* (1999). Additionally, Hess (2014) discusses the evolution of the 'psycho bitch' trope – with *Fatal Attraction* (1987) the 'psycho bitch' was defined as the woman who has an affair ruining a marriage, and finally being killed by the wife. Viewers feel a sense of relief once she is dead, and her mental illness is not given any sympathy (Noll-Zimmerman, 2003). *Gone Girl*, a more contemporary film (2014) is described by Hess (2014) as 'inverting the trope'. Whilst now the 'psycho bitch' is the *wife* herself, she is still not given any more sympathy than her previous form. Therefore, it would appear that even seemingly more positive films are still not fully portraying mental illness without negative and unnecessary stereotypes – showing that whilst film has moved forward somewhat, it still has a long way to go before it portrays the mentally ill in a realistic light.

With regards to gender, whilst the rates of mental illness are almost identical for women and men (Kessler et al., 1994), there are huge disparities in the type of mental illness each gender experiences. For example, a report on Gender Disparities in Mental Health by the World Health Organisation (2013) states that depression occurs twice as much in women as in men, and that women have higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder whilst men predominate in diagnoses of alcohol dependence. Therefore, it is clear that mental illness is a gendered experience. So much so that even with identical symptoms, women are more likely to be diagnosed as depressed than males and are less likely to be diagnosed as having alcohol problems (WHO, 2013). This startling finding suggests that gendered expectations about women being prone to emotional problems skews diagnosis and reinforces stigma and stereotypes about mental illness.

There are also female-specific stereotypes in film. The 'crazy bitch' trope is argued to be a sexist, "problematic and offensive [...] term" by Bitch Flicks, a website which reviews film from a feminist perspective (2012). In the American TV series *American Horror Story*, one character says she was sexually assaulted and saw a ghostly spirit; her husband has her committed to a psychiatric ward. This is a clear example of a mistrust of women and an eagerness to label them a 'crazy bitch' as per the

trope. This depiction is dismissive of women's experiences with mental illness, presenting them as unbalanced and irrational.

However, despite these extensive stereotypes and the clearly gendered experience of mental illness, there is a lack of gender-specific research into the media's depiction of mental illness. Additionally, the majority of studies this section has discussed have analysed older films, as opposed to more contemporary ones. Therefore, this research draws on a previous basis of research into media depictions of mental illness, but advances this research from a gender-specific angle, aiming to find out how women specifically are portrayed as well as exploring if modern film is just as stereotypical as older films. The research question for this study asks how mentally ill women are depicted in contemporary film (from the past 11 years). This research is important as if it is found to be the case that mentally ill women are still being portrayed stereotypically, it is vital to highlight this unjust discrimination with the goal of benefitting these women by trying to end this unfair treatment. This research seeks to cast the focus upon the gender inequality faced by women who experience mental health problems, and in doing this, challenging the "passivity, subordination and silencing of women" (Maynard, 1994: 23).

## **Methodology**

This research involved an analysis of five films containing a mentally ill female character. The analysis methods used were discourse analysis, Foucaudian discourse analysis and Polytextual visual analysis.

**The Researcher:** a female undergraduate student with experience of mental health issues.

### **Collection and Selection of Source Material**

As secondary data was used in the form of films, recruitment of participants and collection of primary data was not necessary. Secondary data, as opposed to primary data, can be used to discover new knowledge whilst also alleviating the problem of collecting participants (Miller and Brewer, 2003).

Nevertheless, the aforementioned five films that were analysed were systematically chosen. This was done by first researching the top 50 films of the year (based on gross profit), starting in 2014, using the website [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com). Each film was then be screened for any mental illness-related content in their synopsis, or any overt reference to mental illness, or a professional opinion on the character's diagnosis, using various websites including the Internet Movie Database, search engines and personal knowledge of the films. This sampling provided the films for the analysis of the script content.

These films were then narrowed down through selecting only the films that contained female mental illness, starting from the year 2014 and going backwards chronologically so that the films were as contemporary as possible, allowing contemporary stereotypes to be analysed and compared to past stereotypes. The first five films that matched these criteria were used, so that the amount of data analysis required was a manageable amount. Film scripts are usually hundreds of pages long, so this meant hundreds of pages of text had to be analysed.

These films were accessed through a mixture of Manchester Metropolitan University's Box of Broadcasts library, an alternative library, and DVD rental. Short quotes from each of the films were used in the research. These quotes were used in the qualitative analysis of each film, in order to illustrate how women with mental illnesses are portrayed in modern film.

### **Mental Illness in the Selected Source Materials**

In some of the source materials, a character's diagnosis of mental illness is clearly stated. In others, the diagnosis is less clear and is more implicit within the text. This reflects mental illness in real life, to some extent – not all mental illness is diagnosed or talked about explicitly.

#### **Gothika**

In *Gothika*, mental illness is evident from the fact that Miranda is detained in a secure treatment facility for psychiatric patients. The audience is told that Miranda experienced violent seizures and severe frontal lobe deficits (*line 241-246*).

#### **Gone Girl**

In *Gone Girl*, Amy is not given a medical diagnosis of mental illness, however she is referred to as a 'psychopath' in the film, and exhibits many psychopathic traits. Duca (2014) states that Psychiatrist Dr. Paul Puri would diagnose Amy with antisocial personality disorder, due to a lack of conscience and the ability to hurt others for their own enjoyment.

### **American Hustle**

In *American Hustle*, Rosalyn is explicitly referred to as "depressed" (*line 713*) and "anxious" (*line 718*). As well as this, Rosalyn seems to show traits of Histrionic personality disorder; the British Film Institute website describes her as "histrionic" (Stables, 2013: Online). Rosalyn exhibits many traits characteristic of Histrionic personality disorder, including being over-dramatic, over-sexualisation and attention-seeking behaviour.

### **Silver Linings Playbook**

In *Silver Linings Playbook*, Tiffany discusses her medications with Pat – she says she has taken Xanax, Effexor and Klonopin (*line 1161-1164*), which are used to treat anxiety, depression and panic disorders. She also exhibits symptoms of Borderline personality disorder; Dr. Steven Schlozman, a psychiatrist, diagnosed Tiffany with Borderline personality disorder when interviewed (Watkins, 2012), citing her promiscuity, mood changes, lying and behaviour such as spitting as evidence.

### **Black Swan**

In *Black Swan*, Nina is shown engaging in behaviours typical of anorexia, bulimonia, self-harm and OCD, as well as psychosis, as diagnosed by Dr. Steve Lamberti, a professor of psychiatry (Donaldson-James, 2010).

### **Visual Media**

The reason for choosing to analyse visual media as opposed to analysing another type of data is succinctly put by Mikos (2014), who said that films replicate the conditions and the structures of our society and of the lives of individuals who live in this society. In the context of this research, this means that the researcher was able to explore how mentally ill women are portrayed by the structures in society, which may or may not mean that they are stigmatised purely on the basis of this mental illness.

Analysing film allowed this research to examine the language used within these films – it has been argued that language is ideological (Matheson, 2005), in that it leads its audience to think in a certain way, usually the same way as the more powerful groups in society. This made analysing film ideal for this research as it allowed us to scrutinise how language constructs mentally ill women in film. Analysis of the language used in film allows us to uncover who holds the dominance and power in society, as this becomes manifest in text – such as a film script (Mikos, 2014).

Additionally, it can be argued that the use of visual methods leads to the production of rich data which is consistent with qualitative research's aims of 'giving a voice' to the marginalised (Willig, 2013:162). Visual research provides insight into which representations of mentally ill women predominate in film (Matheson, 2005), which are then watched by millions of people who perhaps may take away any stigma or attitudes and then internalise them – giving a voice to these people who currently lack one.

### Data Analysis

To explore how mentally ill women are depicted in modern film, this research used both discourse analysis and a form of thematic analysis – Polytextual Thematic Analysis (Gleeson, 2011). Discourse analysis was used to analyse the language used in each film script, and Polytextual Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the actual visual images of each film. Images can give us information that words cannot, and conversely, words can give us information that images cannot (Willig, 2013). This ensures the research gains a multi-faceted analysis that properly explores the depiction of mentally ill women. Taking these approaches to analysis ensured a social constructionist perspective was used in that the research examined how language creates phenomena (such as stigma and stereotypes) (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). This approach allowed the researcher to go beyond solely descriptive methods such as content analysis, and explore the underlying constructions of mental illness through the use of discourse analysis and thematic analysis (Parker, 1998).

Willig sees the growing trend towards analysing images, not just language, “as a result of living in a world pervaded by images” (2013:157). Gleeson’s (2011) approach is Polytextual Thematic Analysis. Gleeson describes a ‘recipe for analysis’ (2011:320). It involves forming possible themes, which Gleeson calls proto-themes, and writing a description of the theme. After continuing to find these themes, the researcher checked for any higher order linkage between the themes. Finally, a select few themes were chosen to write up. Therefore, using Polytextual Thematic Analysis ensured that a fuller understanding was gained of how films are used to construct our view of women who are mentally ill.

Discourse is described by Howitt & Cramer (2014) as focusing on the ways language interacts with society. Willig (2013) describes two major versions of discourse analysis – discursive psychology, and Foucauldian discourse analysis. Discursive psychology is concerned primarily with discursive practises and how epistemologically, how language constructs knowledge. Foucauldian discourse analysis focuses more on the way discourse constructs subjectivity, the self, and power between people. However, Wetherell is strongly of the opinion that there should be a “more synthetic approach” (1998:388), combining the two approaches. The combined approach was used in this research. That way, the research was able to benefit from the advantages from both versions. The disadvantages of discursive psychology include that it is *only* interested in discourse (Langdrige, 2004). However, also using Foucauldian discourse analysis ensured that the construction of subjects and power through discourse was also examined (Willig, 2013), thus counteracting this disadvantage.

With regards to the process of analysis, Potter and Wetherell list 10 steps for discursive analysis, although they caution that they should be used as a springboard rather than a template (1987:175). Using Potter and Wetherell’s 10 steps as a guide, each film was viewed and then scenes were coded for either the presence of a female character that has a mental health issue or the presence of the stigmatising words listed in Rose et al., (2007)’s journal article. Scenes were then transcribed from each film that had been coded as relevant in light of the research question, and then read through, looking for interesting and prevalent themes to code. After this,

using discourse analysis these parts were analysed in-depth, re-reading to see if the themes were linked and if any themes were over-arching between the scripts.

Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine (2014) similarly postulate that there are no set rules for conducting Foucauldian discourse analysis. However, common to all forms of Foucauldian discourse analysis are the exploration of concepts of power and knowledge, which were looked for when coding the data and in the analysis. Discourses are seen as productive, in that they construct concepts (Carabine, 2001) making the use of Foucauldian discourse analysis ideal for analysing how mentally ill women are constructed in film. Using Foucauldian discourse analysis allowed the researcher to research how powerless groups such as mentally ill women have had their experiences repressed and ignored by more powerful groups (Douglas, 2013).

### **Qualitative Methods**

This research used qualitative methods: discourse and polytextual thematic analysis. Qualitative methods were wholly more appropriate to the topic choice for many reasons; one such reason is that it allowed the researcher to focus on social processes in a thoroughly in-depth manner (Griffin, 2004); in this case, mental illness stigma. Qualitative methods allow us to describe and possibly explain phenomena, but never predict – as is the case with quantitative methods (Willig, 2013).

Another reason why this research was much more suited to qualitative methodology is that, due to the flexibility of qualitative methods, they are much more appropriate to understanding vulnerable groups in society, such as the mentally ill (Liamputtong, 2007). However, a disadvantage of qualitative methodology is that analysis can be very time consuming (Griffin, 2004) – indeed, in this research, five film scripts were analysed in minute detail. On the other hand, it could be argued that this ensures we gain a detailed and thorough understanding of the subject matter, far beyond the numeric data of quantitative.

Therefore, the use of qualitative research methods has a multitude of benefits over its quantitative counterpart. It is clear that due to the aim of the research, to discover how mentally ill women are depicted in modern film – the insight and flexibility of qualitative methods, as well as their suitability to research marginalised groups, means that analysis of these films will produced rich, informative discoveries that could never be ascertained through the quantitative medium.

### **Ethics**

As this research did not involve any participants, many ethical principles such as consent and deception were not relevant to the research. This research used secondary data in the form of quotes from film scripts (Appx. 2). Copyright laws were not infringed by the use of these quotes as they were used in an entirely educational capacity and therefore were an exception to copyright law. Extracts of the text are permitted to be copied for non-commercial research and private study. (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/exceptions-to-copyright>.)

## **Analysis and Discussion**

In this section, text from the source materials was analysed using discourse analysis, Foucaudian discourse analysis and polytextual visual analysis.

### **Use of the word 'crazy' for derogation**

GO Fucking crazy bitch

NICK She's framing me for her murder.

GO You are married to a psychopath.

(Lines 3172-3176)

In this extract from *Gone Girl*, Go uses taboo language "fucking crazy bitch" (line 3173) to show she has no sympathy for Amy, who has framed her husband for her murder. The word 'crazy' is a derogatory term for a mentally ill person, but has particular historical significance for women. The term 'hysteria', a now-outdated and exclusively female medical diagnosis, originates from the Greek word for 'womb'. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were viewed as being more likely to become mentally ill due to their reproductive systems being 'unstable' – and thus, the female gender became pathologised (Ussher, 2011). It could be said that this construction of women is still prevailing now – would Amy be called 'crazy' for seeking revenge on her cheating husband if she was male instead of female? Chesler (1972) wrote that women face a psychological double bind in that they are labelled as mentally ill when they exhibit typically female traits like anxiety and depression, but also when they reject the female role by being hostile and successful. Amy rejects the typical female responses (like depression and anxiety) to her husband's infidelity, but when she fights back against this she is labelled 'crazy' anyway for not conforming to expected female behaviour. Ussher calls this a paradox in that women are 'at risk of being deemed mad simply for being women' (2011:26). Therefore, Amy being depicted as 'crazy' is part of a complex interplay between her subject positioning as mentally ill and her gender.

Use of the word 'crazy' also occurs extensively in *Gothika*.

TEDDY How are they treating you?

MIRANDA Like I'm crazy, Teddy. They think I did it, but I didn't do it.

(Lines 546-550)

Even though Miranda herself is a Psychiatrist, she still uses the word 'crazy' throughout the film to refer to mentally ill people, thus making its use derogatory. Its pejorative connotations form the basis of negative stereotypes of the mentally ill, dehumanizing them; Goffman (1986:12) saw stigma as reducing a person from a whole to a 'discounted' one. Using the word crazy to depict the mentally ill (in film and real life) 'enforces their marginalisation' and serves to emphasise their 'otherness' (Nicki, 2001:88). Many studies have shown that the word 'crazy' is widely used; Wahl et al. (2003) and Wilson et al. (1999) both found that the word 'crazy' was commonly occurring in children's television, leading us to conclude that even at an early age, children are being exposed to stigmatising attitudes and language. This is reflected in Rose et al. (2007) who found that 'crazy' was one of the most frequently occurring words that 14-year old students would use to describe mentally

ill people. The use of the word 'crazy' in films like *Gothika* only perpetuates these negative stereotypes of the mentally ill.

### **Power imbalance between the mentally ill and the non-mentally ill**

AMY: I am gone and my lazy, lying, cheating, oblivious husband will go to prison for my murder

(Lines 2915-2916)

In this extract from *Gone Girl* (line 2915-2916), the word 'will' is a modal verb, showing us that Amy is sure she is going to successfully carry out her plan to frame her husband for her murder. Her asyndetic listing in 'lazy, lying, cheating, oblivious' emphasises that she fully believes that there are a multitude of reasons why her husband should seem guilty for her murder. The use of these linguistic devices shows her power and determination to succeed with her plan. Whilst visually, Amy is stereotypically beautiful and feminine with long blonde hair, this is in opposition to the power she holds over her husband as she frames him for her murder; She is 'truly feminine and truly powerful' (Dartnell, 2014: online), something that is not usually seen in media representations of mentally ill women. Amy's actions could be seen to depict her as reclaiming power, perhaps from the patriarchal society that shaped her husband's infidelity.

However, whilst it may appear that Amy is taking back power for herself instead of being depicted as powerless and stigmatised, it can be said that this depiction is nothing but an inversion of the 'psycho bitch' trope – instead of a powerful, independent woman destroying the life of subservient wife, the 'psycho bitch' is the wife (Hess, 2014:online). Women who discard the 'typical' feminine role are more likely to receive a psychiatric diagnosis (Broverman et al., 1970) and whilst Amy is never overtly shown to have a diagnosis, she is referred to as a 'psychopath' (line 3176). Whilst on the surface it may seem that the character of Amy is a departure from the stigmatising attitudes of the past towards mentally ill women, it may just be that stereotypes are transforming into more complex, insidious ones.

Another way in which a theme of power is conveyed to the audience is visually, in *Gothika*. After Miranda has been detained at the Psychiatric hospital, whilst in the exercise yard she sees her former employer, Dr Parsons, emerge from a door at the other side of some barbed wire. This is a powerful visual image, as it demonstrates the separation between the mentally ill and the non-mentally ill and the power dispersion between the two. This image serves to create a powerful in-group of the non-mentally ill and a powerless out-group of the mentally ill, separated by a literal fence. It can be argued that the fence is a metaphor for the construction of an invisible barrier in society between the mentally ill and the non-mentally ill, depicting the mentally ill as fundamentally 'different' to the non-mentally ill. Again, Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory (1979) postulates that we divide society into 'them' and 'us', and that the in-group will discriminate against the out-group in order to enhance their own self-esteem. This may explain why mentally ill women face such discrimination and stigma; indeed, Goffman contended that stigma is based on the possession of a characteristic that makes one different from others – in this case,

mental illness. He also warns that stigma ruins a person's identity; this is important as it shows the damaging effect that stigma and discrimination is having on the mentally ill.

### **Infantilisation of the mentally ill**

Erica removes the earrings, then walks behind Nina to unzip her. Nina faces her.

NINA I can do it.

ERICA Turn

(Lines 999-1002)

In *Black Swan*, there is extensive infantilisation, one example of which is demonstrated in this extract. The word 'turn' is an imperative; Nina's mother is giving her an order. These discursive devices serve to depict Nina as childlike and unable to look after herself. As it is not prefaced by an adverb such as 'please', it conveys an abrupt and brusque tone. In a study by González-Torres et al. (2006) of patients with schizophrenia, patients identified over-protection/infantilisation as a form of stigma that they had experienced. This was seen as partly due to caregivers' fear of their relapse into mental illness. However, the patients reported that this actually further restricted them, beyond the already-existing boundaries of their illness. Furthermore, Cohen and Struening (1962) investigated the attitudes of people who work with those with mental illnesses and found one of these attitudes was one of benevolence. This benevolence appeared to originate in a moralistic duty to help those with mental illness - González-Torres et al. (2006) suggest this attitude may provide the foundation to infantilising behaviour.

Infantile treatment is also seen in *Gothika*, in the following extract:

IRENE I'm just doing my job. You don't want me to get Jim to help me, now do you?

MIRANDA takes her meds, Irene waits for her to open her mouth to prove she took them

IRENE Good girl. You're doing good.

(Lines 392-400)

In this extract, repetition of the word "good" has the effect of conveying a patronising attitude towards mentally ill patients in psychiatric facilities. Irene is praising Miranda for conforming to the rules of the facility by taking her medication. Goffman's seminal text *Asylums* (1968) states that patients in the asylum are required to conform to rules of the institution wherein officials impose activities such as medication taking. Additionally, Goffman discusses a 'basic split' between patients and staff – this is evident in the extract "You don't want me to get Jim to help me, now do you?", which seems quite threatening, leading the audience to think that Jim will likely make Miranda take her medication by force. Goffman postulates that each group regards each other in 'narrow, hostile stereotypes' (1968:18), and whilst Goffman's *Asylums* was published almost 50 years ago, *Gothika* still reinforces this view of psychiatric facilities in contemporary film today.

As well as being patronising, the phrase "good girl" infantilises the recipient by treating her like a child, especially despite the fact Miranda is actually a highly

educated and respected psychiatrist. Usher and Holmes (1997) state that mentally ill people are considered to be vulnerable and less able to make autonomous decisions. They argue this infantilisation unnecessarily stigmatizes the mentally ill, as well as damaging their self-esteem. This shows that cinema stereotypes about the mentally ill are played out in 'real life'. Additionally, a phenomenological study of people recovering from severe mental illnesses identified a key theme of recovery as 'striving for independence' (Bradshaw, Roseborough, and Armour, 2006:1). It is clear that infantilisation is common in the treatment of the mentally ill, perhaps causing needless stigma and further exacerbating the 'us and them' attitude towards the mentally ill.

### **The portrayal of the mentally ill as troublemakers**

In *Silver Linings Playbook*, Tiffany is consistently portrayed as a troublemaker:

PAT SN. She's fucking nuts! When you started spending time with her, it all fell apart. This is the fucking reason right here.

(Line 3250-3251)

In this extract, Pat senior calls Tiffany "nuts", a derogatory term for a mentally ill person. The word 'nuts' is frequently used in society as a referential term for people with mental illnesses (Wahl et al., 2003; Rose et al., 2007). Use of terms like 'nuts' endorse and spread discrimination against the mentally ill. In this case, Tiffany is being depicted as a troublemaker. This is shown in the interpretive repertoire "fell apart" in the extract above which denotes that Pat senior perceives Tiffany as 'ruining things', whilst the taboo language ("fucking") which prefaces "nuts" shows his anger towards Tiffany, whom he perceives as a troublemaker. Finally, "She's fucking nuts!" is an exclamatory, reinforcing Pat's anger: a non-sympathetic attitude towards Tiffany. In this case, Pat is using discriminatory terms on purpose to stigmatise Tiffany, therefore weaponising her mental illness.

Visually, Tiffany is seen spitting on the floor in one of the scenes of the film. During the course of the film, Tiffany is shown to exhibit symptoms of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Women have a much greater propensity of being diagnosed with BPD, with comparisons being drawn between BPD and the now-defunct 'Hysteria' diagnosis of the nineteenth century (Ussher, 2011); BPD is described by Jimenez as 'a caricature of exaggerated femininity' (1997:158). Jimenez continues to describe borderline patients as labelled as mentally ill for behaving in a way deemed completely acceptable in a man. Recent research has made it clear that feelings such as sadness and anger are pathologised in women and seen as caused by their emotions, whilst the same emotions in men were seen as situational (Barrett and Bliss-Moreau, 2009).

There is also evidence of the treatment of a mentally ill character as a troublemaker in *American Hustle*.

IRVING I mean, look, I can't trust you with it anyway. That fire and everything. I can't trust to leave you with Danny.

(line 721-723)

Irving's use of the abstract noun "trust" shows his attitude that he cannot rely on his mentally ill wife to be left with her own son. This intangible concept of trust can be linked with views of the mentally ill as troublemakers who cannot be relied on or trusted. Irving's reference to "that fire" that Rosalyn previously accidentally caused utilises spatial deixis in that Irving is distancing himself from the event by using the word "that" to create psychological distance. This could be interpreted as him placing the blame solely on Rosalyn, emphasising her 'troublemaker' status. The 'mental patient as untrustworthy' stereotype is prevalent in other forms of media, too; Wilson et al. (1999) found characters in prime-time television dramas were portrayed as being untrustworthy.

In previous years, mentally ill people were frequently depicted in film as being behaviourally violent (Time to Change, 2009). It is possible that the 'mental patient as troublemaker' stereotype represents a contemporary transformation of the 'violent mental patient' stereotype. Whilst the mentally ill are depicted as being violent towards others less frequently than in the past, they are instead shown exhibiting behaviours such as spitting and 'causing trouble', replacing overtly violent behaviour with a more insidious but still just as harmful stereotype.

### **Concluding Remarks**

It is important that qualitative research is not evaluated using the same scientific criteria as quantitative (Willig, 2013). With regards to the specificity of this research, the research examined the question of how mentally ill women are depicted in contemporary film, in rich detail. Although only five films were analysed out of the many that are produced involving mental illness, it is not the amount of films that were analysed that is important, but the depth of the analysis. This discourse analytic research generates newer, modern insights into how views of mentally ill women are constructed through film, demonstrating the socially constructed nature of reality and how the media constructs representations of groups in society that can then become internalised.

Authenticity is another important criteria that should be used to evaluate qualitative research. This criteria addresses whether this research accurately and dependably represents the depiction of mentally ill women in film. Guba and Lincoln (1989) list criteria for strengthening claims of the authenticity of research, which include educative authenticity and tactical authenticity. The current research was written with a view to achieving both of these claims; in that it seeks to educate the audience in how mentally ill women are depicted in order to highlight discrimination and stereotypes, as well as aiming for tactical authenticity in that based on the identification of these unjust stereotypes, the audience will be empowered to act and fight back against the injustice and unfair stereotypes mentally ill women experience.

However, whilst some of the criteria for authenticity are fulfilled by this research, there are also limitations that have foundation in the selection of films for analysis. Although the films chosen were representative of the most-watched films at the time, every film was American in origin and could be argued to depict a more westernised view of mental illness. This lack of cultural variation means that the current research may not fully depict an authentic representation of mentally ill women in film, and for the research to be more authentic a more representative sample of films would be needed. Nevertheless, the present research still provides the audience with an analysis of the most popular films depicting female mental illness in a specific culture, providing an important insight into representations of mentally ill women which previous research lacked.

In summary, the present research takes a social constructionist approach to analysing the way women with mental illnesses are depicted in modern film, finding that negative stereotypes still largely prevail today, although some are more insidious and inconspicuous than older stereotypes as stated by previous research in this area. The practical implications of this research are that subtle stereotypes of mentally ill women must be tackled at their source, beginning with the filmmakers and production companies. A diverse portrayal of mentally ill women in film is needed, in order to show that mentally ill women are not simply the sum of a few false stereotypes for entertainment; they are a real group of people. Making producers and directors aware of these troubling representations is the first step towards eliminating these inaccurate depictions. It is hoped that this research, as well as further research in this area will contribute towards a shift in depictions of mentally ill women in film in the future.

### **Reflexivity**

Finlay and Gough (2008) argue that there are two types of reflexivity; personal and epistemological. My topic choice for the present research, mental illness in women in modern film, represents a coming together of many different personal experiences and interests that lie under the banner of personal reflexivity. Whilst social constructionism would argue there is no 'real self', simply different versions of the self (Denzin, 2001:28), I believe my different experiences have shaped my research. Although currently a psychology student, I had studied Sociology at A-Level and learnt in-depth about the social constructions in society such as gender and childhood. This interest has stayed with me throughout my degree and when choosing a topic for the present research I was sure I wanted to look further into these social constructions. Mental health is also a very personal topic for me, as it is both something I have experienced myself and in those close to me, as well as it being something I wish to pursue as a career in the future. Finally, my own gender impinged upon my choice to study how women instead of men are depicted in film, due to having experienced gender-specific issues as a woman and occurrences such as discrimination. This personal reflexivity undoubtedly will have affected the result and process of my analysis, in that I felt sympathy towards the female characters and may have interpreted their depictions in light of this sympathy, instead of seeking out positive depictions of these women.

Epistemologically, as the research was done from a social constructionist point of view, I began the research sceptical and critical of the depictions of mentally ill women in film being accurate. Whilst it could be argued this was of benefit to the research in that knowledge was not taken for granted and allowed me to search for the underlying meaning in language, it may have affected my analysis in that I expected the depictions of mentally ill women that I found to be false and damaging. However, as discourse analysis involves finding meaning within a text, a subjective act, seeking researcher objectivity is unrealistic (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000). The assumptions I came to were thoroughly grounded in theory and research and therefore were fully justified.

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