

Accuracies and Inaccuracies: Analysis of the portrayal of Schizophrenia in the major motion

picture *A Beautiful Mind*

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Schizophrenia is a severe mental disorder that affects one's thoughts and behaviors. Symptoms of this psychiatric disorder include a series of hallucinations, many of which are quite vivid, excessive, and often easily merge into one's reality (Saha, 2017). *A Beautiful Mind* is the real-life story of John Nash, a man suffering with Schizophrenia. This movie works to shed light on the concept of mental illness by bringing awareness of the disorder to its viewers. The movie does a generally good job depicting possible symptoms that come with the disorder and exploring the stigma behind Schizophrenia. While many films portray Schizophrenia as multiple personality disorder, *A Beautiful Mind* does not, it accurately portrays the symptoms of Schizophrenia. It also shows that mental illness does not have to completely hold you back. However, the movie is not always accurate! These inaccuracies consist of an incorrect recovery time period, symptoms that do not match the specific type of Schizophrenia Nash suffers from (Paranoid), a barbaric and seemingly inhuman usage of electroshock therapy, the ease of insight, and the portrayal of people suffering with Schizophrenia as inherently dangerous.

A Beautiful Mind depicts the real-life story of mathematician and noble prize winner John Nash. While navigating the normal course of life, Nash is diagnosed with paranoid Schizophrenia, a mental illness where one experiences a series of splits from reality and paranoia. Specifically, Nash began to experience auditory and visual hallucinations. He also had delusions that he had been recruited by a government agency as a code breaker. He thought his "job" was to work against the clock, trying to gain information about plans of a potential attack on the United States. This obsession with code-cracking began to consume Nash's everyday life. Soon after, Nash's wife sought out a treatment for him, consisting of various medications and

therapies. These medications, however, had adverse side effects, making Nash unable to work, which was something very important to him. Eventually, Nash came to face these delusions (e.g., his made-up roommate Charles, Parcher, the government official that recruited Nash, and Charles' niece, Marcee) and becomes consciously aware that they are not real; but ultimately has to live with them for the rest of his life. This mental illness does not hold Nash back as he is still able to make ample contributions to the game theory and economics.

Zhu, Li, and Wang (2016) tested the characteristics of possible assaultive behaviors that come as a side effect of Schizophrenia. Researchers conducted a study with data from 75 male patients that were diagnosed with the mental illness Schizophrenia. All participants were hospitalized at the Central South University Second Xiangya hospital in Changsha, China. These men were first given a general questionnaire and then completed the modified overt aggression scale (MOAS), the historical clinical risk management-20 (HCR-20) questionnaire, the hare psychopathic checklist-revised (PCL-R), and the positive and negative syndrome scale (PANSS). Based on the results from MOAS participants were placed into two groups, classifying their behavior as "aggressive" or "non-aggressive." The participants in the "aggressive" behavior group had considerably different scores in many portions of the HCR-20 questionnaire. Specifically, they were more likely to report past violent events, violent events when young, disobedience in the past, and impulsiveness. Aggressive participants were more likely than non-aggressive participants to be anti-social and had drastically higher scores in positive, depressive, and paranoid symptoms. This information suggests that many things factor into one's aggressive behavior, including confrontational and distressing events, vulnerabilities in one's personality, and the psychopathology of the current illness they have. In other words, schizophrenic patients who have worse symptoms are also more likely to be aggressive.

Generally, *A Beautiful Mind* accurately portrays Schizophrenia. This can first be seen by the symptoms that Nash began to experience as his illness progresses. Many studies have indicated that lower emotional intelligence is linked to that of people experiencing Schizophrenia (Vishwakarma, Dwivedi & Kumar, 2016). This means that people who are affected by Schizophrenia have a harder time dealing with and expressing one's emotions, and they are unable to handle interpersonal relationships. Throughout the movie, Nash is seen struggling with his emotions and does not always know how he can express them. For example, when trying to pick up a woman in a bar, Nash blatantly says to her "What do I have to say to you to get you to have intercourse with me?" Many men experience this sexual urge; however, it is known that one must manage how they act in certain social situations in hopes of achieving their desired result. Nash, however, lacks this social and emotional awareness, not realizing that he cannot explicitly say what he feels and expect it to go well.

This lack of emotional intelligence that comes with Schizophrenia also plays a big role in the stigma that comes with the illness. Thibodeau and Principino (2018) found that people would sit a farther distance away from someone who was said to have Schizophrenia compared to someone who had a physical illness like Type 1 Diabetes. This stigma is seen throughout the movie, like when John is experiencing a delusion on the campus of the University where he teaches. People look around with disgusted and obnoxious looks on their faces as John walks around in circles, seeming to be talking to himself. Nobody steps up to help John, and many people begin to walk the other way, because they do not want to have an interaction with someone who is "crazy."

This stigma around Schizophrenia goes hand-in-hand with many misconceptions and stereotypes about it. People who are unfamiliar with the disorder themselves often mistakenly

link Schizophrenia to multiple personality disorder (Lampropoulos, Wolman, & Apostolidis, 2017). Schizophrenia is not a split in personality, but instead involves frequent splits in reality. Nash does not have multiple personalities; he is consistently very analytical, driven, and compassionate. For example, when John sees Patcher (a delusion) say that John's wife is a threat to the work he has been assigned to, he begins to freak out and tries to protect her. He begins yelling phrases like "leave her alone" and "stay away from her" as the audience sees Patcher pointing a gun in Alicia's direction. In the process of protecting his wife from a threat that seems so real to Nash, he knocks her down. It is evident from his facial expressions and actions that John did not mean for this to happen. This caring person is still present within Nash, but he struggles with his awareness of reality, making it hard to do "compassionate" things the right way.

In spite of his illness, Nash's driven personality continues to shine, and he achieves greatness. The movie does a good job of expressing the idea that Schizophrenia is something that can be overcome, that one's life does not end because they are diagnosed with the illness. Many cognitive functions are unaffected by the illness, such as learning through experience, memory, and declarative verbal information (Kern, Hartzell, Izaguirre, & Hamilton, 2010). This is extremely important to anyone affected by Schizophrenia because it gives them hope. People diagnosed with Schizophrenia often feel that they cannot be helped or will never live a "normal" life again. This learned helplessness is something the movie works to combat. Because this was based on a true story, the fact that Nash was able to accomplish so much resonates with people who are struggling psychologically.

Throughout the film, Nash is seen engaging in a behavior that is consistent with that of someone experiencing Schizophrenia. Some researchers argue that severe Schizophrenia is

associated with unusual behaviors (Zhu, Li, & Wang, 2016). Also, if someone is experiencing Schizophrenia and is male, there is an even higher probability of them engaging in these unusual tendencies. In the film, Nash is seen working in his dorm room and then begins to talk to Charles (another delusion). Nash suddenly becomes extremely frustrated and pushes his wooden desk covered with books and papers out his upper-level floor room. This action is atypical for someone who is experiencing normal frustration but coincides closely with someone who suffers from Schizophrenia.

When a true story becomes a major motion picture, screenwriters and directors make adjustments to the storyline to better appeal to an audience. These adjustments often lead to inaccuracies, however. After Nash is diagnosed with paranoid Schizophrenia, he is admitted into a psychiatric facility. There he begins treatment. Along with prescription medications, John experiences electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), also known as shock therapy. The movie portrays this form of treatment as extremely barbaric and painful. Nash is seen being strapped down aggressively to a table, where shocks are administered that seem a little too powerful to be effective and seem to be hurting him. This image created in the viewer's mind about shock therapy is false. ECT is administered through a formula-based method taking into account one's age and gender (Kristensen, Bauer, Hageman, & Balslev-Jørgensen, 2011). Small electrodes are placed in the right unilateral position, sending low dose pulses to the brain. Some procedures even address possible discomfort through anesthesia.

Schizophrenia is not inherently violent, but *A Beautiful Mind* portrays Nash as dangerous. Although people suffering from Schizophrenia can do things that seem a bit violent (Zhu, Li, & Wang, 2016), they are not pre-disposed to be this way forever. Even when Nash was on his

medication and doing better, his wife was still fearful for the safety of their child. Having this illness made a lot of people scared of Nash himself, not just the illness.

Nash, throughout his struggle with Schizophrenia, was still able to have intelligent thoughts. Being so smart, Nash was able to introspectively assess the situation he was in and come to the realization that a lot of the things he had been doing and the people he had been talking to were part of the symptoms of schizophrenia. Nash is able to make the connection that Marcee, Charles' niece (delusion), is not real, because over time she does not age. A connection like this something that many suffering from Schizophrenia struggle to make. The movie makes it seem like it is quite easy for someone to make this connection like Nash did. People with Schizophrenia experience these delusions and hallucinations for a large part of their lives, and when they are told that something that seems so real to them is not, it creates dissonance (Saha, 2017). Recognizing that they themselves are sick is *not* something that comes easily.

After Nash is treated, he is seemingly able to bounce back to his everyday life of teaching mathematics. This recovery period is inaccurate, because recovery is a process. Buonocore et al. (2018) defines recovery as normal psychosocial functioning and a lack of hospitalization for five years. The movie portrays the treatment of Schizophrenia as a very quick process that can be controlled through various medications and ECT. Once Nash realizes that these medications are inhibiting his ability to think critically, he decides that he will not take the medication and fight the Schizophrenic symptoms on his own. At this point in the movie Nash is portrayed as "cured" and "getting better" but he struggles every day to fight these delusions. When one looks at the quality of life Nash is experiencing when fighting these delusions when he is "recovered" it is not quality one would desire.

Nash was experiencing paranoid Schizophrenia, which is particularly known for auditory hallucinations, rather than visual (Witkowska, 2015). Given that Nash suffered from Paranoid Schizophrenia, he should not have frequently experienced visual hallucinations. In fact, the real John Nash did not experience visual hallucinations (Nasar, 1998). However, the way the film portrayed the experience of visual hallucinations was accurate. These visual hallucinations were consistent with the way people experiencing Schizophrenia would see them.

Schizophrenia is a life altering disorder, affecting the state of consciousness of any individual experiencing the illness. The media often encourages misconceptions about various mental illnesses, including Schizophrenia. While *A Beautiful Mind* is not perfect at depicting schizophrenia, it is a stepping stone, working to shed light on the truths of the illness. *A Beautiful Mind* does many things well: it depicts possible symptoms and behaviors that come with the disorder, explores the stigma behind the illness, avoids conflating Schizophrenia with multiple personality disorder, and shows that mental illness does not have to completely hold you back. Addressing inaccuracies (e.g., an incorrect recovery time period, symptoms that do not match the type of paranoid Schizophrenia, a barbaric and seemingly inhuman usage of ECT, the ease of insight, and the portrayal of people suffering with Schizophrenia as inherently dangerous) is important, because it helps to spread the scientific truth about Schizophrenia to the general public. An accurate portrayal of Schizophrenia is also important to those suffering from the illness; by spreading the truth about it, it allows for these people to become more comfortable living a life with Schizophrenia.

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