Media Portrayal of Stuttering

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The Visualization of the Twisted Tongue: Portrayals of Stuttering in Film, Television, and Comic Books

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This article discusses the media's portrayal of stuttering. Unfortunately, many depictions of stuttering are inaccurate and/or negative. Few films, television, and comic books have provided a positive representation and awareness to the public.

Stuttering as defined in the article:

"The interruption of the flow of speech by hesitations, prolongation of sounds and blockages sufficient to cause anxiety and impair verbal communication".

How People Who Stutter (PWS) are portrayed

- The familiarity and perceived understanding of stuttering has been transferred to popular culture outlets where stuttering characters have long been included.

- The portrayals of these characters have often pandered to the public's basic ideas of stuttering and thus have been stereotypical, unrealistic, and at times even derogatory.

Typical Negative Depictions of PWS

PWS have been depicted as:

- Weak
- Unintelligent
- Self-conscious
- Pitiful
- And even morally irresponsible and villainous

In most cases, these characters are included for audiences to laugh at and are made a mockery of.

Negative Portrayals of PWS for the Purpose of Comedy

Possibly one of the best known characters with a stutter is Looney Tunes' Porky Pig, whose purpose is to provide audiences "with a good laugh".

- A clinical analysis of Porky's stuttering determined that he had a high disfluency rate (23% of his words) and displayed atypical and exaggerated characteristics of stuttering (Johnson, 1987).

- At times, Porky has such difficulty getting through words and phrases that he is forced to replace them or even stop speaking though the viewer knows what he wishes to say.

- Porky is mainly a reactionary character in the films and often his scenes are chances for the audience to hear the cartoon pig "talk funny".

- Notable Porky Pig moments:
  - *I Haven't Got a Hat* (Porky Pig's 1935 debut) where he fails to recite "The Ride of Paul Revere" to the amusement of the audience.
  - 1938's *Porky's Poppa* where he becomes so enraged after hearing himself speak that he smashes the phonograph on which his voice is being played.
  - His most well known expression of "Th-Th-Th-That's All Folks!"

I couldn't stop laughing so hard. There's other things that made me laugh, but this one tops it all !!!!

8 REPLY

As a person who stutters this is the only representation I've had on TV 💀 💀

117 REPLY



Lol, his stuttering is funny af

147 REPLY

Poor porky

It's like someone was scratching a record too much

13 REPLY

The guy laughing in the background makes this song for sure!

I don't know if many of you guys knew this, but I just researched this today and according to my research I did so far, the first one literally actually had a terrible stuttering problem in real life. I feel so bad for this poor guy

10 REPLY

Negative Portrayals of PWS (Cont'd)

- It is significant that when used as a comic element the stutterer is not a true representation of a person but rather is the physical embodiment of his speech impediment. His only purpose is to stutter and thus amuse.

- Likely, the most common way in which stuttering is used in visual media is to easily display that a character is weak or nervous.

- Barry Guitar, asserts that, "research has shown that most people, even classroom teachers, stereotype people who stutter as tense, insecure, and fearful".

- Because many in the general public already believe stutterers to be anxious, unconfident, and timid then writers need not spend precious time explaining that a character possesses these traits, they instead assume the audience will make the mental leap from the speech disorder to the weak behaviors in which it is associated.

Negative Portrayals of PWS: Weakness

- Probably the most famous motion picture to invoke images of a nervous and weak stutterer is the 1988 comedy *A Fish Called Wanda*. In this film Michael Palin plays Ken Pile, a hitman who stutters.

- Typically, a hitman would be viewed as strong, powerful, cunning, etc. However, Palin's character is relentlessly teased by other characters, particularly a thief named Otto, and "cannot find the courage to defend himself". Reinforcing the depiction that PWS are weak and nervous.

- As the film draws to a close Otto and Ken engage in a final showdown and Otto still ridicules Ken by exclaiming, "It's K-KK- Ken, coming to k-k-kill me". Eventually Ken attempts to kill Otto and finds that this act of violence and revenge has cured his stuttering.

- As his weak characteristics disappear, so does his stuttering. This served as a sign of the person he no longer is. Implying that stuttering can be cured by one simple act is insensitive and gives an inaccurate idea to viewers. Additionally, this film continued to solidify the inaccurate association between stuttering and weakness.

Negative Portrayals of PWS (Weakness Cont'd)

- Examples of stuttering being associated with weakness are very common. Another example can be seen in Extreme Championship Wrestling and World Wrestling Entertainment character Buh Buh/Bubba Ray Dudley. Bubba Ray suffers the taunts of his opponents who make fun of his backwoods background and his stuttering. Bubba Ray stutters severely and he is unable to pronounce his name . That is until an opponent hits him in the chest with a crutch.

- This action "toughens up" Bubba Ray and allows him to lose his stutter. Because Bubba Ray has become a "real man" he no longer suffers from stuttering.

- Similarly, in the film (and book) Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone the villain Professor Quirrell feigns stuttering in order to appear weaker and thus not be suspected of his crimes. Quirrell appears to be nervous, timid, and rather harmless and his stuttering showcases these traits. When he stops pretending to be meek, Quirrell also stops stuttering, and is shown to be a powerful villain. He is even quoted saying "... who would suspect p-p-poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?"

- Because stuttering is often used as visual shorthand for weakness, characters that stutter are rarely cast in the role of the hero.

Negative Portrayals of PWS: Villainous and Immoral

In addition to being portrayed as weak and uneducated, PWS can sometimes be portrayed as villainous and immoral

- In the 1972 John Wayne film *The Cowboys*, John Wayne hires a group of young men to work on a cattle drive. One of the boys (about age 10) stutters. As the film progresses an accident takes place that forces the boy to come to John Wayne for help. The boy is so shaken that he is unable to speak fluently and when it becomes clear what has happened John Wayne verbally abuses him and tells him that he can talk normally if he wishes to.

- John Wayne and the boy get into a verbal dispute where the boy has a violent outburst which appears to cure his stuttering.

- This type of reaction is actually known to be counter productive in treating PWS, and sends the wrong message about how to interact with/treat PWS. It also reinforces the idea that stuttering is a choice. On the next slide, we see John Wayne accuse the boy of almost letting his friend drown, implying that he chose to stutter when he could have simply stopped stuttering to get help for his friend.

Wayne-"You almost let your friend drown out there in that river."

Kid-"I'da rather d-d-died then do that."

Wayne-"And you're a liar!"

Kid-"It ain't my fault I stutter."

Wayne-"Listen to me, you whining little welt. You're gonna stop that stuttering or get the hell out of here. You're gonna stop it or go home, do ya hear me?"

Kid-"Son of a b****!"

Wayne-"What did you say?"

Kid-"You Goddamned son of a b****!"

Wayne- "Say that again."

Kid-"You Goddamned mean son of a b****."

Wayne-"Say it faster."

Kid-"You Goddamned mean dirty son of a b****."

Wayne-"Wouldn't make it a habit calling me that, son."

Implications from Negative Portrayals of PWS

- In recent years other physical or mental challenges such as blindness and deafness have begun to be portrayed more realistically in the visual media. Alternatively, stuttering has rarely been shown in a positive or even-handed manner but rather the speech impediment is often used as a narrative code to help facilitate commonly held stereotypes. People that stutter are frequently portrayed as humorous, nervous, weak, unheroic, or villainous.

- These generalizations rarely allow a given character an opportunity to become well rounded and instead he commonly becomes a personification of his stuttering or a trait that is associated with it. This in turn serves to perpetuate a greater misunderstanding about people that stutter. In doing so both stutterers and those they come in contact with are harmed and that is the most unfortunate visualization of all.

- Overall, these types of depictions give people incorrect and unrealistic expectations when it comes to the treatment and severity levels of disfluency disorders.

- These depictions also cause for the generalization of PWS, rather than allowing people to look at the individuality of those who stutter. Negative media portrayals allow for stuttering to define who the person is and may impact the way PWS are treated, as well as how they view themselves.

Positive Portrayals of PWS

The most common seemingly positive way that stuttering is showcased is when a storyline is crafted that aims to teach the audience about it.

- Among the most notable is an episode of the popular television show M*A*S*H entitled "Run for the Money" (1982) in which Charles Emerson Winchester befriends a patient that stutters. Winchester attempts to convince the young soldier that stuttering does not make him unintelligent or inferior and eventually the young man that stutters gains a higher degree of self-respect. It is revealed at the end of the episode that Winchester's sister also stutters.

- *Little House on the Prairie* ("The Music Box" (1977) and "No Beast so Fierce" (1982)). In these episodes children that stutter are taunted but later lessons about proper behavior toward others are learned.

- Furthermore, in *Justice League of America* Episode #36 (1965) each of the team's superheroes become handicapped: Superman goes blind, Green Arrow loses his arms, the Flash has only one leg, Hawkman develops asthma, and Green Lantern begins to stutter. Evidentially the heroes learn to adapt to their new-found disabilities and learn the lesson that everyone is important no matter what challenges they face.

From ASHA's "At Long Last, A Positive Portrayal of Stuttering" by Judith Maginnis Kuster

- In 2011, ASHA published an article highlighting the release of The King's Speech, a movie "which provides a sympathetic and accurate portrayal of stuttering".

- Though the movie depicted some outdated and discredited treatment methods (as it took place in the 1930's and 1940's), it also emphasizes the importance of compassion and motivation. The therapist working with King George VI "established an ideal clinical relationship—supportive, reinforcing, encouraging—and an equality between client and therapist."

- The script was written by David Seidler, who himself stutters, giving an accurate point of view. He has been honored for his work on the film and also was asked to be a guest speaker at several conferences.

- Contrary to common depictions of stuttering "The film made it clear there are no "quick fixes" and that the client/clinician "relationship" is more important than techniques taught to the client. Although the king's stuttering was not "cured," he became an effective communicator. The king demonstrated his increased self-confidence after his great "speech" with a flash of humor. Logue told the king, "You still stammered on the 'w,'" and the king replied, "I had to throw in a few extra ones so they knew it was me."

- https://youtube.com/clip/Ugkxf5hYAbhJXafhnMLvm3atm3u50X0_3Bat

Discussion

- Did the information from the article surprise you?
- How can we help change the narrative?

References

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