SIUE's Hicks presents on recognizing stigma in media's portrayal of the mentally ill

by Madelaine Gerard, Staff Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - What do films like "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," "Psycho" and "Shutter Island" have in common? Each of the films contain fictional characters who suffer with mental illness.

Through his research, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Gary Hicks, PhD, professor in the Department of Mass Communications, sought to recognize the stigmas

placed upon people with mental illnesses through in-depth content analysis, interviews with the producers behind the media itself, and those who have vested interest in these topics, including those who suffer with mental illness.

Hicks showcased a portion of his book titled, Media, Stigma and Mental Illness, for students, faculty and guests as part of Mass Communications Week, being held on campus April 3-6. Hicks highlighted how the media has, arguably, played a role in perpetuating the stigmas associated with the mentally ill, a commonly marginalized group.

"The media has created and perpetuated the story of mental health and mental illness," Hicks said. "Most of the time, these stories have not been pretty. It is hard to place the stigma of 'evil' on someone who has a recognizable illness. Would we call someone who has cancer, evil? There was one point in time in our culture that we did, and we are at fault."

Hicks took the audience on an introspective look throughout cinematic history to view the common portrayals of characters who had mental illnesses. In the 1940s, films like "The Snake Pit" showcased mentally ill patients in an "insane asylum" as literal prisoners.

From the 1950s onward, people with mental illness were frequently considered as the "other" of society. And, it was with films such as "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" that media consumers begin seeing the mentally ill being portrayed in an entirely different light.

"Suddenly, with the help of a genius actor like Jack Nicholson, there became some levity based upon the depiction of mental illness," Hicks said.

At this point in history, instead of demonizing this group of people suffering with mental illness, society as a whole began viewing them as the comic relief of society by showing the "lighter side" of mental illness.

"There are scholars at this time who thought that this was indeed a way to add humanity to this group instead of closing them off from society," he said. "There are always different ways in which the dominant culture works to make people feel like they do not belong, all the way from locking them up to making them out to be fools."

This instance is defined quite well in the 1998 film "Rain Man." In the film, Dustin Hoffman's character uses his knack for counting to assist his half-brother, portrayed by Tom Cruise, to count cards and gamble.

"We have gone from the portrayal of monsters who should be locked up, to the common sidekick, to someone whose value is placed on if they can do something to benefit the mainstream 'normal' people," he said.

Hicks also introduced films like "A Beautiful Mind" and "Silver Linings Playbook" as a step in the right direction in film. He shared that stories of people who have mental illness can indeed be told, but their psychosis cannot be the only facet of their personalities depicted on screen. These multifaceted portrayals of the true human experience are key in realizing that the community can be represented without shame, according to Hicks.

Throughout his presentation, Hicks sought to open the audiences' minds to the emerging and predisposed stigmas relating to mental illness within communities around the world.

"This work extends from my own culture and my experience with mental illness," he said. "It emphasizes how the environment in which you live, and your media diet can influence the idea of human frailties and how they can affect these marginalized groups," he said.