

FILM REVIEW

The Role of Film in Public Perception of Bipolar Disorder: Perpetuating Stigma in *Silver Linings Playbook*

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Film is an influential medium for shaping public attitudes. From a cognitive science perspective, mental images created by film evoke more dominant responses and are longer lasting than those created by text media (Tan, 1992 cited in Fischhoff, 1996). Consequently, stereotypes presented in film have a lasting impact on audience members, and can alter their perspective of stigmatized groups such as those living with psychiatric illness. (Fischhoff, 1996). *Silver Linings Playbook*, a 2012 romantic comedy film written and directed by David O. Russell, conforms to the popular narrative structure of the so-called ‘edgy’ romantic comedy through the use of psychiatric illness as a plot-motivator. However, the film’s presentation of psychiatric illness is problematic. The plot is replete with harmful stereotypes; for example, it implies that individuals living with psychiatric illness are violent, and can overcome their conditions through force of will. Further, the portrayal of psychiatric illness, most notably bipolar disorder, is diagnostically incorrect in *Silver Linings Playbook*. In committing to the conventional narrative of the romantic comedy, any exploration of living with psychiatric illness is discarded halfway through the film, to allow for the burgeoning romantic tension between the main characters, which dominates the rest of the film. While a number of characters in *Silver Linings Playbook* are implied to be living with psychiatric illness, this review will focus on the main character, Patrizio junior (Pat Junior), as his reported experience with “bipolar disorder” serves as the initial focus of the film.

Constraints of Genre and Narrative Formula

While a precise definition remains elusive, *genre* in film can be loosely defined as typical moulds according to which films are structured (Chandler, 1997). According to film theorist Robert Stam (as cited in Chandler, 1997), genres can be based on such concepts as the content of the story (the war film), location (the Western), or sexual orientation (Queer cinema). Some films may even contain multiple genres or sub-genres (Dirks, 2015). Genre constrains the possible ways in which a narrative is interpreted, guiding audiences towards a preferred interpretation, which is normally in accordance with a dominant societal ideology. The framework of the genre, its narrative formula, can be seen as offering expectations, enabling audiences to generate feasible predictions about events in a narrative. *Silver Linings Playbook* conforms to the “new romantic comedy” genre. As Barnes (2014) notes, this new sub-genre has introduced complex, edgy backstories and defined a set of narrative parameters for audiences and producers. The “new romantic comedy”, however retains a defined structure: 1) a love plot in which two sympathetic and well-matched lovers are united or reconciled; 2) a focus on romantic ideals with true love able to surmount most obstacles; and 3) an

ending with a *denouement*, a sense of catharsis as conflicts are resolved and where the protagonist is better off than at the story's outset (Johnson, 2015).

Influencing the new romantic comedy genre is likely the ubiquity of so-called 'reality media', such as 'reality television'. Increasingly, audiences seek the voyeurism of observing others' lives, which may lead to a blurring between what is actual and what is scripted, as producers seek entertainment value in 'the real lives' of others (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). Quirky or eccentric individuals who participate in various competitive events are the staple of this genre (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). In keeping with this formula, *Silver Linings Playbook* presents Pat and Tiffany entering a dance competition. Reality media however conforms to market demand; placing entertainment value over accuracy (Bagdikian, 1985).

Incorrect Portrayal of Psychiatric Illness in *Silver Linings Playbook*

In supporting the narrative structure of the new romantic comedy, we are told early in the film that Pat suffers from bipolar disorder, arguably a major psychiatric illness. Pat's behaviour in *Silver Linings Playbook* is not, however, consistent with the diagnosis of bipolar disorder. At the outset of the film, instead of offering a nuanced portrayal of Pat's struggle with the end of his primary relationship, the plot is quick to blame the failure of the relationship on Pat's "untreated bipolar disorder", which is supposedly the underlying cause of his propensity for violence. This sets the tone of Pat's character for the rest of the film, portraying him according to a familiar stereotype of this condition. Pat's behaviour in *Silver Linings Playbook* is not, however, consistent with the diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Specifically, Pat Junior's behaviors fail to meet criteria established in the The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Version Five (DSM-5).

Bipolar disorder is a major recurrent psychiatric illness involving sustained changes in mood state usually lasting weeks to months. Central to bipolar disorder is periodic mood dysregulation manifesting as episodes of hypomania and depression or episodes of mania with or without depression, depending on the subtype. Episodes of mania are characterized by abnormally elevated, euphoric, sometimes irritable, mood that lasts a minimum of four days, but usually weeks. Several other symptoms must also be present, including grandiosity; decreased need for sleep (due to excess energy); increased talkativeness or rapid speech; engagement in high risk activities with potential negative consequences (usually due to impaired judgment); flight of ideas and racing thoughts; distractibility or inability to stay on task. Episodes of depression are characterized by sad mood, and/or inability to experience enjoyment. This change in mood state must be accompanied by several of the following symptoms: decreased energy, disrupted sleep, lack of interest in previously enjoyable activities, withdrawal from social interaction, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, impaired concentration, dysregulated appetite (frequently accompanied by changes in weight). Finally, individuals may experience a sense of hopelessness, leading to thoughts of ending their life.

The film presents three powerful scenes displaying Pat engaging in erratic, violent behavior contextualized as symptoms of bipolar disorder. We will refer to these sequences as: the "Broken Window", the "Wedding Video", and the "Shower".

The Broken Window scene is an early sequence used to introduce the behavioral manifestations of Pat's psychiatric illness. Occurring shortly after his discharge from a psychiatric facility, this scene opens with Pat intensely focused on his wife Nikki's book selection for a high school class she teaches. Pat appears alone in a room quietly perusing books from her curriculum. Having stayed up most of the night quietly reading, Pat suddenly yells out that he disagrees with the selection of a Hemingway novel due to its "negativity". Pat then proceeds to enter his parent's bedroom. Rousing them from sleep, he loudly complains about the Hemingway novel being on the booklist. He appears irritated. His thoughts are rapid and irrational. He paces, gesticulates and appears restless. Pat's father, also Patrizio (or Pat Senior), becomes enraged, angrily accusing Pat Junior of a lack of respect. Pat Senior's highly emotional response appears to further escalate his son, culminating in Pat Junior shattering a window by throwing the novel through it. Shortly after this incident, Pat Junior's agitation appears to subside, he speaks quietly, stands still, and generally appears reflective in his demeanor. The following day, Pat Junior displays none of the agitation of the previous evening (which was very brief), as he and his father engage in a discussion about repairing the window. Pat Junior's behavior in this sequence fails to meet DSM-5 criteria for bipolar disorder, as described above. While he appears irritable, this dissipates after several minutes. His rapid speech does not persist. This scene portrays someone with poor emotional control, exhibited as an angry outburst, accompanied by inappropriate behaviour (waking his parents, throwing the book at the window) - not bipolar disorder. There is also no evidence of sustained symptoms, which is an absolute criterion. Pat Junior's angry outburst could have resulted from factors such as: 1) ongoing grief reaction to a traumatic relationship breakup; 2) the triggering effects of Pat Senior's characterological emotional reactivity; 3) Pat Junior's difficulty regulating his own emotions.

In the "Wedding Video" Pat becomes increasingly frustrated while searching for a video of his marriage to Nikki. Unable to find it, he wakes up his mother late at night, demanding that she help him. He subsequently becomes involved in a physical altercation with his father, who hits him multiple times. There is much yelling with hostile utterances by both father and son. Ultimately, a police officer already familiar with Pat Junior, arrives in response to neighborhood noise complaints. Again, Pat Junior's behavior does not meet DSM-5 criteria for bipolar disorder. He experiences several minutes of dysregulated mood. As in previous segments, the predominant mood is anger, with hostile utterances, aggressive gestures, and violence. It should be noted that Pat Junior maintains a degree of restraint when being physically assaulted by his father (he does not strike back). Pat Junior also does not exhibit any of the accompanying symptoms of mania necessary for the diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

The "Shower" is a montage of images representing Pat Junior's fragmented memories of the assault which led to his arrest and subsequent hospitalization. In this sequence Pat enters the house where he co-habits with his wife Nikki. He soon discovers Nikki

engaged in sexual acts with a male colleague. Overcome with rage, Pat violently assaults Nikki's lover. Bloodied body images are briefly flashed. Occurring about one third of the way into the film, this scene is apparently designed to emphasize Pat Junior's mental instability. The audience has already learned that Pat Junior was required to undergo psychiatric treatment by the court, as opposed to being incarcerated. This was supposedly due to Pat Junior having "undiagnosed bipolar disorder" at the time of the assault. Descriptions and depictions of Pat Junior's behavior at the time of the assault offer no evidence that he met criteria for bipolar disorder. The film makes no effort to present Pat with the appropriate constellation of symptoms associated with bipolar disorder. The film instead contextualizes Pat's disorder mainly in terms of violence, as the audience views fragments of depictions of the assault.

While violent behavior is socially unacceptable, it is not synonymous with psychiatric illness, nor is it even common for persons living with mental health conditions (Keshavan, 2013). Focusing on Pat Junior's violent behavior, *Silver Linings Playbook* reinforces the stereotype that psychiatrically ill individuals are inherently violent. This association of psychiatric illness with violence remains an enduring theme in cinema, and *Silver Linings Playbook* is not alone in its portrayal of this stereotype (Pavlovic & Pavlovic, 2011). Popular, big-budget films have undergone little change regarding their depiction of psychiatric illness. Researchers Pavlovic and Pavlovic (2011) found that psychiatrically ill film characters were frequently portrayed as "odd," "inappropriate," "dangerous," "unstable," "frightening" or "perverted". Unfortunately, such portrayals can have far-reaching impact on the lives of people living with psychiatric illness. Wahl and Lefkowitz (1989) found that portrayal of violent and dangerous psychiatrically ill individuals are associated with negative attitudes toward psychiatric illness in general and reduced support for community-based care of psychiatrically ill persons.

A further issue is the film's failure to present bipolar disorder as a serious psychiatric illness. Let us momentarily ignore the hospital scene and the few overt references in the dialogue to Pat having a major psychiatric illness and/or having bipolar disorder. How does the audience know that Pat is suffering from a serious psychiatric illness? If the audience had not been explicitly told that Pat Junior had bipolar disorder, the film would likely continue to be coherent to most audiences. In this scenario, it is quite possible that Pat would be viewed simply as a person struggling with anger regarding his wife's infidelity. A sizeable group of viewers may even see Pat as a victim, and his violent rage, while not socially acceptable, might appear as an understandable reaction to severe stress. Again, the film's focus on violence serves to confuse *mental health* with *psychiatric illness*, that is, the difference between *coping with stress* and a *biological illness*.

A major theme in keeping with the film's narrative structure is *love conquers all*, the idea that Pat is saved from himself through his romantic relationship with Tiffany. While intimate partnership is a basic human need, it is not sufficient to prevent or cure a major psychiatric illness like bipolar disorder. Would we expect a relationship to cure someone of cancer, heart disease, or diabetes? Similarly, Pat somehow overcomes "bipolar disorder" through sheer force of will. How would we react to a film that promoted the notion that we can overcome cancer by willpower?

It should be noted that individual responsibility serves as an underlying ideology throughout *Silver Linings Playbook*. In short, Pat Junior "overcomes" the limitations of a "serious psychiatric illness" (reportedly, bipolar disorder) by willing his recovery. Medications are central to the treatment of bipolar disorder, and actions such as managing stress, getting enough sleep, eating well, exercising, and psychotherapy are all components of a comprehensive treatment plan. We would argue that it is Pat Junior's *insight* that allows him to accept that he has an illness and adhere to treatment and that it is not sheer willpower that enables his recovery. Pat does appear to take his medications; he exercises regularly and sees his psychiatrist. From a specific point in the *Silver Linings Playbook* narrative, Pat Junior makes linear improvement once he has 'decided to recover' beginning with his commitment to taking his medication. Pat's trajectory is however clearly contrived when compared to the life experiences of most people living with bipolar disorder, or with major psychiatric illness in general. Most of these individuals achieve greater symptom control, understanding, and self-acceptance over time, but not immediately. This path can be difficult with recurrent episodes, subsyndromal symptoms, and setbacks, particularly at times of stress. Recovery is a complex, highly personal process, which does not lend to dramatic storytelling.

It is difficult in film to capture the subtle, pervasive nature of the stigma and structural barriers faced daily by many people living with psychiatric illness. As such, Pat Junior remains socially integrated, supported by his family and friends. While some patients have this kind of support, many do not. Pat Junior does not struggle with the stressors faced by a significant number of people living with major psychiatric illness, such as low income (Danziger, Frank, & Meara, 2009), difficulties accessing safe and affordable housing (Stergiopoulos, Hwang, & Gozdzik, 2015), or accessing quality health care, including pharmaceuticals (Nankivell, Platania-Phung, Happell, & Scott, 2013). Hence, *Silver Linings Playbook* does not directly explore how someone with major psychiatric illness might address these issues. Consequently, the film fails to give a voice to many people experiencing the practical daily challenges of living with psychiatric illness.

Positive Attributes of *Silver Linings Playbook*

While the film's portrayal of bipolar disorder is diagnostically inaccurate and limited in its appreciation of some of the main challenges faced by those living with this illness, there are nonetheless positive attributes embedded in the narrative that should be highlighted. Most importantly, *Silver Linings Playbook* presents its protagonist, identified as having a psychiatric disorder, as an aspirational character. Pat Junior maintains a positive attitude towards living with a psychiatric disorder and is undeterred by the negative reactions of friends and family. Pat Junior models a positive attitude towards treatment, uses medications and is seen to improve. In sum, Pat appears to transcend himself; becoming a more insightful, mature person as a result of his illness and subsequent treatment.

Willing Suspension of Disbelief

Focusing on these positive attributes, a lenient reading of the film might further argue that *Silver Linings Playbook* is about entertainment. From this perspective, it might be said that the film does not claim a social-change agenda; and viewers are overreaching when debating how technically accurate the portrayal of bipolar disorder is in the film. On this view, audiences should enjoy the overarching narrative, set to a familiar formula. As such, any technical inaccuracies should be met with a willing suspension of disbelief. However, as Dall (2013) argues, by taking an oversimplified, typecast version of a disorder at face value to incorporate into their film, writers (like those who created *Silver Linings Playbook*) are actively perpetuating issues of stigma and discrimination. "It makes for easier or more hair-raising scenes," writes Dall, "but that does not make it anymore correct. And with the amount of misinformation surrounding mental disorders, it can be damaging to perpetuate these 'facts'". We argue that tackling an 'edgy' issue like psychiatric illness in the medium of popular film comes with a responsibility. It is inherently irresponsible to relegate psychiatric illness, which affects the lives of so many people in such profound ways, to a plot device in the service of mass entertainment.

Conclusion

Popular media shape and maintain attitudes (Fischhoff, 1996). Good acting and a compelling story can make any premise believable. Few commercially successful films take people out of their comfort zones (Bagdikian, 1985). Producers are not inclined to risk investor funds on difficult, complex, and nuanced narratives. Psychiatric illness is neither comfortable to observe, nor simple to understand. As a commercial film targeting box office receipts, *Silver Linings Playbook* takes few chances, aiming to be accessible to the largest number of viewers. When two of Hollywood's most glamorous actors are cast, their glamour must be showcased. Consequently the portrayal of psychiatric illness is of value only insofar as it supports the film's formulaic narrative. Unfortunately, psychiatric illness portrayed in *Silver Linings Playbook* is technically incorrect. This raises important questions. Do producers of popular films have an ethical duty to accurately portray psychiatric illness? Should film not amplify, rather than speak over, the voices of those with psychiatric illness?

Accurate portrayals of psychiatric illnesses in film facilitates informed discourse. This discourse serves to reduce stigma, decrease the effects of marginalization, and support the delivery of effective psychiatric care (Wahl & Lefkowitz, 1989). Unfortunately, *Silver Linings Playbook* does little to promote an accurate understanding of bipolar disorder and relegates serious psychiatric illness to a disposable plot device.

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