COUNSELLING AND SPIRITUALITY: SELECTED TOPICS IV; IPA 5164

Images of Mental Illness in Film

Professor Barry H. Schneider

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Objectives

In this course, we will use the medium of film to deepen the students’ understanding of psychopathology. The films will serve in essence as case studies. Students will learn about selected important metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and social issues in abnormal psychology. The skills students should gain include, most importantly, being able to develop well-reasoned personal opinions about the issues in question. Students will apply their existing knowledge of the nature, extent and treatment of psychological disorder. We will explore both the advantages and the limits of prevailing theories and conventional classification schemes in understanding individuals facing the challenges of psychological disorder.

We will discuss the interrelated metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and social issues that emerge from the films considered. Epistemological issues include the diagnosis of mental disorder and knowing when people are competent to understand the moral and legal consequences of their actions. Ethical issues include the rights of people with mental disorders to participate fully in social interaction, to be treated with respect and to get treatment or to refuse it. Finally, social issues include the stigmatization and medicalization of deviant behavior and the effects of the mental health profession on society. Throughout the course, we will compare popular thought about mental illness as conveyed in films with what the experts say, as a way of gaining a critical perspective on both.

Topics of Study

The common core experience of the class, led by Dr. Schneider, will feature consideration of the following topics:

1. The basic distinction between normal and abnormal
2. Depression
3. Personality disorders
4. Depictions of counselling and psychotherapy

Other disorders, selected by the students, will be covered during in-class presentations.

Given the experiential and participatory nature of this course, attendance at all sessions and participation in class discussions are mandatory. A medical certificate is required for any exemption.

Students are expected to be familiar with the University’s policies regarding academic integrity and honesty. All violations will be reported immediately and automatically.

Assignments and Composition of the Final Grade

1. In-class written assignments (4 x5%=20%). These assignments will consist of three questions requiring brief paragraph answers. They will cover the background readings as well as the film content. Although the topic of each class will be announced during the previous class, no previous announcement will be made as to whether the learning objectives of the class session will be achieved through in-class discussion only, written assignment only or a combination of the two modalities.

2. Participation in class discussion and written précis on how the films, readings and class discussions change your thinking. Throughout the course, keep a diary of how your beliefs, impressions, attitudes and knowledge about mental illness change as you watch the films, reflect on them and participate in the discussions. Try to make at least one entry for each film. Come to class prepared to discuss those parts of your journal that you feel comfortable sharing with the group. Before the class discussion, send Dr. Schneider a brief (no more than 1000-word) well-written précis summarizing the entries that you are comfortable sharing with him. (15%)

3. Participation in class discussion and written précis on the depiction of men and masculinity and/or the depictions of women and femininity in the films. This assignment will complement lecture material on gender differences in many of the disorders, especially personality disorders. As you watch the films, discuss them and think about them, make notes about the depiction of women, men and gender roles. Try to make at least one entry for each film. Before the class discussion, send Dr. Schneider a brief (no more than 1000-word) well-written précis summarizing the entries that you are comfortable sharing with him. Prepare to participate in the class discussion on these issues. (15%)

4. Presentation (30%). Students will present to the class a 60-minute overview and critique of the portrayal of a psychological disorder in selected novels and/or films. These presentations will cover disorders not considered in the sessions led by Dr. Schneider, to be chosen from: 1) autism spectrum disorder; 2) intellectual disability; 3) substance use disorder; 4) dissociative disorder; 5) post-traumatic stress disorder; 6) psychotic disorder; 7) bipolar disorder; and 8) obsessive-compulsive disorder. The presentations will be based on films or novels selected in consultation with the instructor. The in-class presentations will begin with a very brief review of the DSM5 definitions of the disorder and any related controversies. The student will proceed with a very brief review of prevailing opinion about the cause(s) of the disorder and
the major treatment modalities. Most of the presentation will be devoted to a critique of three films and/or novels that contain depictions of the disorder. How do the depictions differ from each other and from the scientific literature and popular beliefs? How do they, collectively, contribute to understanding of the problem shown? Finally, the student will discuss what the best treatment option would be for the characters. The student is encouraged to show film excerpts and/or to read excerpts from the novels.

5. Proposal for a new film (15%). Prepare an initial proposal (1000 words, maximum) for a new film in which a main character is a person with some form of mental illness. Assume that you will be the screenplay writer, producer and director. The proposal should contain the following elements: 1) brief plot synopsis; 2) reason why you want to make this film including only reasons you are comfortable sharing with the class; 3) comparison with other films and novels with characters experience similar problems; 4) notes to the casting director; 5) notes about scenery, props, lighting and background music. Add as an appendix a one-page letter to a charitable organization requesting financial support for the film. Prepare to present your proposal very briefly to the class for feedback and questions.

6. Participation and attendance (5%)

Required Reading

1. Textbook to be used for review of background material:

Castonguay, L.G., & Oltmanns, T.F. (2013). Psychopathology: From science to clinical practice. New York: Guildford Press. Chapters 1, 2, 9 and 14 will serve as background for the core content of the course. Additional chapters will provide the background needed for optimal learning about the disorders considered in student presentations.

2. A brief, critical overview of the portrayals of people with mental illness in the mass media:


3. Most of the following readings are available at the University of Ottawa library website. Arrangements will be made for photocopying the others. Please read in the order listed. The one French-language reading is optional.


Almost all of the films considered in this course are available on iTunes. Some may be available at Netflix Amazon, Glebe Video and/or Elgin Video.