



Special Olympics

Changing Attitudes Changing the World

Media's Portrayal of People with Intellectual Disabilities

Popular media portrayals of people with intellectual disabilities are often unrealistic and limiting. The one-dimensional victim often portrayed in popular media accounts bears little resemblance to the actual lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Whether the 2004 Athens Olympic Games or the 2005 Special Olympics World Winter Games, athletic competition provides a unique venue to view the full spectrum of human emotions. Spectators witness unique and remarkable stories of perseverance, dedication and challenges overcome. Hailing from scores of nations and competing in dozens of sports events, the athletes' backgrounds and talents are as numerous as they are inspiring.

Media covering the Special Olympics World Games would be hard-pressed to characterize these athletes as anything but courageous achievers, whether they are medal winners or not. Yet a study spanning four decades and involving thousands of newspaper, television and film depictions found an increasingly narrow portrayal of people with intellectual disabilities. The characters often were depicted as "vulnerable," a "victim" and/or a person worthy of pity. This typecast was increasingly common in recent years.

Research Background and Discoveries

In order to gain a baseline measure of the media's treatment of persons with intellectual disabilities, a recent study traced depictions of people with intellectual disabilities in movies, television and newspapers from the United States over several decades. The study, conducted by Dr. Carol J. Pardun at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is the most comprehensive examination of its kind ever conducted. Specifically, the study examined nearly 3,900 items (scenes and newspaper articles):

- Film: 41 movies from 1962–2003 (2,423 scenes)
- Television: 38 television programs (1,153 scenes) from 1980–2004
- Newspapers: 311 articles from 1995–2004 in Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles and New York newspapers.

Trends toward vulnerable, pitiful characterization

The study determined that over time media depictions of persons with intellectual disabilities focused more often on pity than on strength and achievements. Specifically, the research found in film and television:

- **Super hero** portrayals, showing stories of great achievement despite obstacles, declined significantly, particularly from the 1990s onward.
- Portrayals designed to **elicit pity** increased significantly, with the largest increases in recent years.
- **Victim** portrayals significantly increased in 2000–2004.
- **Vulnerable** depictions increased from the 1980s onward.

While the portrayal of unrealistically heroic types has declined, which is consistent with portraying people with intellectual disabilities more realistically, their increasing portrayal as vulnerable, pitiable and as victims demonstrates that progress overall is not being made.

Despite greater scientific knowledge, policy and societal changes, and the establishment of high-profile events such as the Special Olympics World Games, media accounts have continued to portray persons with intellectual disabilities in stereotypical, one-dimensional ways. Often, characters with intellectual disabilities were nearly "invisible" presences (not complex), even if they were the main characters.

"According to the 2003 Multinational Study of Attitudes toward Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities, more than 80 percent of the U.S. adults surveyed felt that media portrayals were an obstacle to the acceptance and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities."

Media

Occurrences of 5 Most Common Characteristics Portrayed in the Media of People with Intellectual Disabilities - Entertainment and Print Media

Behavior Displayed	Entertainment Media	Print Media
Engaging in Simple Conversation	64.1%	39.9%
Sustaining a Friendship	26.3%	24.8%
Mainstream Activities (sports, work, school)	19.5%	55.9%
Coordination	13.1%	34.4%
Reading or Doing Math	5.1%	14.1%

Major Milestones Affecting Improvements in the Lives of People with Intellectual Disabilities in the United States over 40 years

President's Panel on Mental Retardation (1961)

Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (1975)

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975)

Americans with Disabilities Act (1990)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990)

U.S. Supreme Court, Olmstead Decision (1999)

Is This "Reality TV?"

In order for people to understand the complexity of the lives of those with intellectual disabilities, the media need to portray these individuals realistically—neither better nor worse than they are in real life.

- This study found that nearly 50 percent of the media individuals had jobs, ranging from mechanic, dishwasher and hospice workers to bank employees, pianists and architects. However, 2000 U.S. Census figures indicate that employment rates among people with mental disabilities (including intellectual disabilities) is only 32 percent overall, and below 30 percent among females with mental disabilities. Additionally, the percentage of people with any disability living below poverty is 60 percent higher than those without disabilities.
- This study found that nearly three-quarters of the intellectually disabled in the media were men, while in reality the proportion between men and women is 3:2.
- This study also found that males were depicted far more often than females as being capable of sustaining friendships and acting appropriately.

Differences in Characterizations between Entertainment (film and television) and Newspapers

	Entertainment Means	News Means
Does the character act appropriately in the scene?	4.38	4.23
Does the character read, write or do math?	4.47	3.32
Does the character exhibit coordination?	4.46	4.14

Perhaps limited by the medium, newspaper articles characterized people with intellectual disabilities in significantly less competent ways. Scale of 1 to 5, 5 being most positive. These findings were significant at the .01 level or less.

Significant Difference in Portrayals between Special Olympics Athletes and Other Characters with Intellectual Disabilities

	Special Olympics Athlete	Not a Special Olympics Athlete
Does the character act appropriately in the scene?	5.00	4.37
Is the character engaged in mainstream activities?	5.00	4.66

Scale of 1 to 5, 5 being most positive. These findings were significant at .03 level or less.

Clearly the basic media representations of people with intellectual disabilities are far from reality. Exaggerated or distorted portrayals perpetuate misperceptions and hide the real issues that those with intellectual disabilities face.

Media's Role: Next Steps

Popular media has a well-documented ability to both influence national perceptions and reflect the prevailing attitudes of an era. The recent trends in media portrayals of people with intellectual disabilities reinforce inaccurate and limiting notions of these individuals' lives. Too often, the variety and complexity of people with intellectual disabilities' lives are reduced to one-dimensional typecasts.

In order to depict a more accurate image of individuals with intellectual disabilities and to effect a positive change in public attitudes, media coverage should emphasize the multi-dimensional and competent aspects of these lives. Preferred or positive characters are those portrayed in an array of functions, expression of emotions and interactions with others.

Members of the general public who understand the true lives of people with intellectual disabilities (including those with intellectual disabilities themselves) should insist upon accurate portrayals in popular media. The general public needs to be critical consumers of the media, willing to analyze depictions, voice opinions and challenge conventional stereotypes with real-world examples.

The media have a plentiful source of multi-dimensional, competent subjects among Special Olympics athletes. According to this study, characters portraying Special Olympics athletes were significantly more likely to act appropriately or engage in mainstream activities than other characters with intellectual disabilities. By simply reporting on the inspiring stories and achievements of the athletes both on the playing field and in their lives, media members will begin to change the existing stereotypes of the vulnerable victim into an accurate depiction of life for people with intellectual disabilities, a way of life captured by the Special Olympics Athlete Oath:

"Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt."

Furthermore, meaningful inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in the development of stories, scripts and articles, and in the production of media could provide the media industry with credible and astute assistance with depicting more accurate and realistic stories.

American Media: Shaping International Perceptions

This study provides a first-ever review of the depictions and treatment of people with intellectual disabilities. While the research focused on U.S. originating media, it should be noted that American film and television is widely exported to be viewed by international audiences, thus shaping not only national perceptions, but also the world's perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities. More research is encouraged, particularly in other media-rich and influential countries.

Special Olympics and Its Research Mission

Special Olympics is the worldwide leader in providing high-quality sports training and competition opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities, offering almost 1.4 million athletes from more than 150 countries the opportunity to participate in 26 Olympic-type summer and winter sports. Special Olympics Programs also promote social competence and self-esteem, acceptance and improved health outcomes. More recently, Special Olympics has emerged as a global leader in cutting-edge research and evaluation to promote better understanding of issues surrounding intellectual disabilities. Research projects commissioned by Special Olympics are designed to provide high-level, externally validated scientific data to:

- Guide improvements in Special Olympics programs and practices;
- Inform external audiences about the unmet needs of people with intellectual disabilities worldwide; and
- Inform the public about the competence, value and contributions of people with intellectual disabilities to the world community.

References for further information

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