The Portrayal of Tourette Syndrome in Film and Television

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ABSTRACT: Objective: To determine the representation of Tourette Syndrome (TS) in fictional movies and television programs by investigating recurrent themes and depictions. Background: Television and film can be a source of information and misinformation about medical disorders. Tourette Syndrome has received attention in the popular media, but no studies have been done on the accuracy of the depiction of the disorder. Methods: International internet movie databases were searched using the terms “Tourette’s”, “Tourette’s Syndrome”, and “tics” to generate all movies, shorts, and television programs featuring a character or scene with TS or a person imitating TS. Using a grounded theory approach, we identified the types of characters, tics, and co-morbidities depicted as well as the overall representation of TS. Results: Thirty-seven television programs and films were reviewed dating from 1976 to 2010. Fictional movies and television shows gave overall misrepresentations of TS. Coprolalia was overrepresented as a tic manifestation, characters were depicted having autism spectrum disorder symptoms rather than TS, and physicians were portrayed as unsympathetic and only focusing on medical therapies. School and family relationships were frequently depicted as being negatively impacted by TS, leading to poor quality of life. Conclusions: Film and television are easily accessible resources for patients and the public that may influence their beliefs about TS. Physicians should be aware that TS is often inaccurately represented in television programs and film and acknowledge misrepresentations in order to counsel patients accordingly.
Despite TS having received popular media attention there has yet to be a study investigating the portrayal of TS in film and television. The aim of the study was to investigate recurrent depictions of TS to indentify major themes of its portrayal in fictional television programs and films.

**METHODS**

**Search Strategy**

International internet movie databases were searched using the key words “Tourette’s”, “Tourette’s Syndrome,” and “Tics”. All movies, shorts, and television programs featuring characters or scenes with TS or a person imitating TS were sought. The searches were conducted using IMDb.com, allmovie.com, reel.com, rottentomatoes.com, foreignfilms.com, The Chinese Movie database (www.dianying.com), the Asian Movie database (asiandb.com), and the Bollywood Movie Database (www.bollywood.de). Similar search strategies have been adopted in other studies that investigated the cinematic portrayal of neurological conditions. Wikipedia was also searched using the key term “Tourette’s Syndrome”; movies and television programs identified in the “Film and TV section” from the Social and Cultural Aspects of Tourette’s Syndrome page (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociological_and_cultural_aspects

![Figure 1: Search Strategy. Outline of search strategy for retrieving and viewing films and television shows.](image)
saturation of them was reached. For example, viewing
considered. Movies and television shows were viewed until
Emotions that the portrayal of TS was meant to evoke were also
predetermined hypothesis. During viewings, notes were taken
physician involvement with the patient, and characters’ social
sociological phenomena from a set of data without any
demographics of characters with TS, vocal and motor tics seen,
research. Grounded theory generates theoretical explanation for
theory approach allowed for emergent themes surrounding
demographics of characters with TS, vocal and motor tics seen,
physician involvement with the patient, and characters’ social
and romantic relationships were identified and coded as such.
Emotions that the portrayal of TS was meant to evoke were also
considered. Movies and television shows were viewed until
saturation of themes was reached. For example, viewing
continued until no new themes were found in the movies and
television shows. At this point, the authors were confident that
enough movies and television shows were viewed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cinematic Details

Ninety-two films and television shows were generated using
the search strategy (Figure 1). Forty-nine films and television
shows were eligible for inclusion into the study. Saturation of
themes was reached after viewing 37 films and television shows
(15 television show episodes, 1 short, 2 made-for-television
movies, and 19 fictional movies) (For a full list of all film and
television shows see Appendix 1). We found the largest number
of television shows and movies with characters who had TS or
were imitating TS after 1990 (2-7% before 1980; 8-1% from
1980 through 1989; 35-1% from 1990 through 1999; 51-4% from
2000 through 2009; and 2-7% after 2010). The majority of shows
and films that featured TS were comedies (n =16) and dramas
(n=16); one romance, and four action movies also depicted the
disorder. Characteristics of characters having TS or imitating TS
are summarized in Table 116-20.

Depiction of TS

Characters who suffered from TS were featured in 66.6% of
the films and television shows. The remainder of the films and
television programs reviewed had 14 characters imitating or
impersonating a person with TS. The majority of characters with
TS or imitating TS were male (74%), which is in keeping with
what is clinically expected as males are four times more likely
than females to have TS21.

A variety of motor and vocal tics were depicted in the films
(Figures 2 and 3); neck bending was the most common motor tic
and the most common vocal tic was coprolalia. Of the characters
imitating TS, 73% (11/15) exhibited coprolalia, giving a
misleading impression that coprolalia is the most common
symptom of TS. In reality, coprolalia has a prevalence of 8-5%
to 50% in TS patients\textsuperscript{1–22}, but remains a widely recognized clinical feature of TS by laypersons. Furthermore, the actors in most television and films reviewed did not adequately portray coprolalia but rather demonstrated more typical swearing in the context of a sentence. The use of coprolalia for comedic effect falsely emphasizes this as a key symptom of TS, giving TS the reputation of “the cursing disease” in popular media\textsuperscript{23}.

**Film Genres and Portrayal of TS**

Despite the fact that most characters with TS were portrayed as well groomed with normal appearance, many were also shown to have an eccentric look. In reality, children with TS do not appear physically different from others and are similar to controls on most measures of externalizing behavior and social adaptation\textsuperscript{22}. Although the visual impact of tics can draw public attention, making characters dress eccentrically in films is an inaccurate representation of TS and may promote stigmatization, which can contribute to a lack of public acceptance for this population\textsuperscript{23}.

Although tics were glorified in many of the films and television programs, general information regarding tics was accurate. Tics were most commonly compared to an uncontrollable urge similar to a sneeze (\textit{South Park},\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Harvie Krumpet},\textsuperscript{24} First of the Class,\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Deuce Bigalow: Male Gigalo},\textsuperscript{26} The Simpsons,\textsuperscript{27} The Big White,\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Dirty Filthy Love},\textsuperscript{17} Ally McBeal,\textsuperscript{29} 7th Heaven,\textsuperscript{30} \textit{L.A. Law},\textsuperscript{31} and \textit{Nurse Jackie}\textsuperscript{32}). Tics were also shown to be suppressible (The Tic Code,\textsuperscript{20} Touched by an Angel\textsuperscript{33}) and worse in stressful situations (The Tic Code,\textsuperscript{20} Maze,\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Dirty Filthy Love}\textsuperscript{17}).

In comedic films, TS was usually imitated by characters in the form of coprolalia. The diagnosis of TS was used to excuse inappropriate swearing and create a comedic effect (\textit{South Park},\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Jumping Jack Flash},\textsuperscript{34} \textit{500 Days of Summer},\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Wedding Crashers},\textsuperscript{36} \textit{The Wedding Singer},\textsuperscript{37} \textit{The Simpsons}\textsuperscript{23}).

**Depiction of the Etiology, Diagnosis, and Treatment of TS**

The etiology of TS in most films seemed to be idiopathic. Diagnosing physicians provide some inaccurate information to patients. Doctors often showed little understanding of the syndrome, provided medically inaccurate information, and demonstrated minimal compassion for patients with TS and their families. Moreover, medical treatment of the disorder was always presented negatively. This cinematic depiction of physicians is consistent with studies showing that physicians are often shown as egotistical and uncarin in fictional films, like “mad scientists” who value science more than patient welfare\textsuperscript{13}.

Treatment of TS was not addressed in detail in any film or television program reviewed. Any medication suggested for symptom management was always spoken about negatively. Four programs (one movie and three television shows) mentioned the medication haloperidol. Other medications briefly mentioned include clonidine (\textit{L.A. Law}\textsuperscript{31}) and Prozac (\textit{Harvie Krumpet}\textsuperscript{24}); however, no explanation is given regarding the reason they are prescribed, their efficacy, or their side effects. Doctors were accused of simply trying to fix TS through medicating their patients without taking into consideration side effects and challenges that the medications may create (\textit{Phoebe in Wonderland}\textsuperscript{38}).

**Social Implications of TS: Family relationships, School Environment, and Friendships**

**Negative Family Dynamics**

A common feature of the television programs and movies reviewed was the notion of a challenging family dynamic for the child with TS (Maze,\textsuperscript{18} Phoebe in Wonderland,\textsuperscript{38} The Tic Code,\textsuperscript{20} South Park\textsuperscript{16}). Family stress was most often shown to be driven by the lack of family support and understanding for their child’s aesthetically disruptive movements. Conflicts occurred when parents were unable to agree on if they should be concerned about the tics (\textit{Phoebe in Wonderland},\textsuperscript{38} Maze,\textsuperscript{18} 7th Heaven,\textsuperscript{30})
The Tic Code20). Moreover, siblings of children with TS were also shown to be impacted by the syndrome (Phoebe in Wonderland,29 Touched by an Angel30). There is a lack of public acceptance of inappropriate behaviors in particular spaces at improper times and patients with TS can be accused of “doing it on purpose”7,8,23. Although many patients with TS find close family and select friends understand the behaviors, it can be a problem to appear out of control in our society where self-control is valued and expected10,23.

Challenging School Environment

An unwelcoming school environment, including bullying, for individuals with TS was another common finding. They are shown to be unpopular, typically having a hard time forming friendships (7th Heaven9). Children with TS expressed the desire to be treated like everyone else in the school environment (Front of the Class,25 South Park14), but this appears to seldom occur in movies and television. In reality, at school and in other public places, patients with TS find that each twitch or noise they make is an opportunity for others to make a comment on their behavior8,10,23. This attention forces individuals with TS to feel they need to seek privacy to express their tics freely and escape the notice of others and their stigmatizing reactions9,10,23.

Romantic Relationships

Several films depicted romantic relationships as challenging for patients with TS. Characters developed romantic relationships with partners who express not caring about or noticing the tics (The Big White,28 Maze,18 The Tic Code,20 L.A. Law,31 Dirty Filthy Love7). However, despite finding loving partners who accepted them, characters with TS are shown to be insecure about their tics and push romance away (Maze,18 The Tic Code20). Overall, films and television programs imply that it is difficult for characters with TS to find love because of insecurities about their tics. (L.A. Law,31 Maze,18 The Tic Code20).

Overall, there was a disproportionate representation of negative school, social, and family relationships. Nearly all television programs and movies reviewed demonstrated challenges in at least one of these areas. No films showed positive school experiences for children with TS. Although it is common for children to face challenges in the school and social environments, overrepresentation of negative social experiences for patients with TS may give patients the impression that TS can create. To help patients deal with the challenges surrounding TS, physicians can encourage discussion around individual patient perceptions of TS during appointments.

Portrayal of Other Psychiatric and Neurologic Diseases

Although neurological diseases have been featured in many motion pictures, few studies have examined their representation. Two studies investigating seizures in movies showed that cinematic depictions of seizure disorders were exaggerated11 and that first aid treatment was inappropriate in the majority of cases12. A study on the portrayal of coma also concluded that misrepresentations of coma and awakening occurred in movies, subsequently impacting public perception of coma13.

Limitations

There were several limitations to our study. First, it is possible that our subjective analysis of the television program and movie portrayals may not be shared by the general viewing public. Second, although all efforts were made in the design of the search strategy to maximize videos and television programs that were viewed, there were still some videos that could not be obtained, particularly foreign films. These omissions reflect the bias of only looking at English language depictions. Therefore, we cannot claim that this is a complete assessment of all representations of TS in fictional movies and television programs. However, many reviewed movies and television episodes were current, popular, widely viewed and would have likely been seen by the general public. As such, the viewing public is likely to be exposed to film and television shows with similar portrayals of TS as those found in this study.

Conclusions

This is the first study to look at the portrayal of TS in fictional movies and television programs. The findings of our study are consistent with other studies that have misrepresented medical conditions in popular media41. Given that the primary goal of a movie is to entertain, it is understandable why screenwriters exaggerate diseases to create dramatic or comedic effects. However it has been argued that producers and screenwriters should have a responsibility to be more accurate in their representation of medical conditions41. Until such a change occurs, however, physicians must continue to recognize and acknowledge misrepresentations in popular media and counsel patients accordingly.

When patients are given a new diagnosis of TS, they have few sources from which they can gather and learn information. Since information in the popular media is easily accessible, it is a major resource for patients and therefore can strongly shape public beliefs about the syndrome. Physicians discussing TS with patients and families should be aware of the images in the popular media and the misperceptions that these representations can create. To help patients deal with the challenges surrounding TS, physicians can encourage discussion around individual patient perceptions of TS during appointments.
REFERENCES

### Appendix: List of movies, television programs and shorts retrieved. Programs viewed as part of the study are represented in italics.

#### Movies
- 500 Days of Summer
- Boondocks Saints
- What about Bob
- Niagara, Niagara
- The Tic Code
- The Big White
- Maze
- Crank 2
- How to lose a guy in 10 days
- Jimmy Zip
- Deuce Bigalow: Male Gigolo
- Bitch Slap
- Phoebe in Wonderland
- Into It
- Matchstick Men
- Not Another Teen Movie
- Jumping Jack Flash
- Wedding Singer
- Wedding Crashers
- Son of Sunshine
- Vince Will Meer
- Passing Stones
- Passe-Passe (Off and Running)
- Schism
- Utanfor din dorr
- Menaces – exclude
- Garmento – exclude
- Post Modern America – exclude
- Up Close – exclude
- John’s Arm: Armegeddon
- Tic
- Torrid House
- Torried Without a Cause
- The West Wing
- Outside Your Door
- The Green Door
- Wish You Were Dead

#### Educational Videos
- Psychology of Human Behaviour
- Tics and Related Disorders
- Treating Tourette’s and Other Mental Illness
- The Compulsive Mind: Tourette’s Syndrome/OCD

#### Documentary
- Twitch and Shout
- Direct Order
- Shane: Tourette’s Syndrome
- Tics and Tourette’s Syndrome
- Inside Tourette Syndrome
- Family Victim
- Shadows and Illuminations
- Afflictions: Culture and Mental Illness in Indonesia
- The Bird Dancer
- Movements and Madness: Part 1- Gusti-Ayu

#### Mokumentary
- The Jenkins County 5th Annual Bumper Sticker Contest

#### TV Series
- South Park: Le Petit Tourette (Season 11, Episode 8)
- Curb Your Enthusiasm – The Grand Opening (Season 3, Episode 10)
- The Simpsons: Marge Gets a job (Season 4, Episode 7)
- NewsRadio – The Song Remains the Same (Season 2, Episode 21)
- Quincy M.E. – Seldom Silent, Never Heard (Season 6, Episode 14)
- L.A. Law-Noah’s Bark (Season 4, Episode 9)
- 7th Heaven- Words (Season 4, Episode 14)
- Touched by an Angel – Angel on my Tree (Season 7, Episode 10)
- Ally McBeal – Reasons to Believe (Season 4, Episode 9)
- Dexter- Easy as Pie (Season 3, Episode 7)
- Being Human- I Loathe You for Sentimental Reasons (Season 2, Episode 4)
- Snuff Box – The Wedding (Season 1, Episode 6)
- Episodes - Untitled (Season 1, Episode 2)
- Nurse Jackie – P.O. Box (Season 2, Episode 9)
- The Practice – The Pursuit of Dignity (Season 2, episode 14)
- The Fast Show – Recording Engineer (Season 3, Episode 6) – Exclude not about TS
- St. Elsewhere – Up and Down (Season 5, Episode 7)
- Shameless – Tomorrow People (Season 1, Episode 5)
- Malcolm in the Middle – Hal Sleepwalks (Season 6, Episode 7)
- TV Fun House – Cavenmen Day (Season 1, Episode 5)
- L.A. Law – God Rest Ye Murray Gentleman (Season 5, Episode 8)

#### TV Documentary
- Q.E.D. – John’s Not Mad
- Teenage Tourette Camp
- The Boy Can’t Help It
- I Have Tourette’s but Tourette’s doesn’t have me
- Tourette de France
- The Tourette’s Guy
- Tourette’s
- Tourette’s: I Swear I Cannot Help It
- Tourette’s Uncovered
- ABC News: Growing up with Tourette’s Syndrome
- 20/20: A Revealing Intimate Look at Children with Tourette’s Syndrome