
Rebecca Renwick, PhD, OT Reg (Ont); Ann Fudge Schormans, PhD, RSW; and Deborah Shore, MSc OT, OT Reg (Ont)

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ABSTRACT

Adults with intellectual/developmental disability (IDD), and their occupational participation, are vastly under-represented in Hollywood films. Because films often provide individuals’ only experience of people with IDD, cinematic representations can influence audience perceptions. Thus, films can help inform public perceptions about desired and appropriate occupational participation for people with IDD, potentially impacting their access to meaningful occupational participation and achievement of occupational potential. Accordingly, this research examined occupational portrayals of adults with IDD in contemporary Hollywood films. Occupational portrayals, as defined here, refer to representations of the dynamic process of the person participating in occupation(s) in a context. Grounded theory methods guided coding and analysis of qualitative data collected from eight contemporary films using an occupation-focused tool. Two major, striking themes emerging from the qualitative analysis—infantilization and simplification of participation in complex occupations (with three associated sub-themes)—are discussed. Implications of the findings and future research directions are considered.

This article addresses two primary themes in the lives of people with intellectual/developmental disability (IDD): occupational participation and media representation. Film portrayals of occupational participation available to people with disabilities are of critical importance because visual media influence and help shape societal attitudes and beliefs (Shakespeare, 1999). Individuals with disabilities are vastly under-represented, but typically stereotyped, in mainstream media (Giles, 2003; Haller, 2010). Within the disparate fields of disability studies, media and film studies, and psychology, there is significant research about film portrayals of physical disability and mental illness (e.g., Black
& Pretes, 2007; Darke, 1998; Levers, 2001; Mitchell & Snyder, 2001; Shakespear, 1999). Yet literature about media representations of people with IDD is sparse, and none examines film portrayals of their occupational participation. Similarly, occupational participation is considered fundamental to health and well-being (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007) but remains a significantly under-researched area. These issues are at the heart of this study examining occupational portrayals of adults with IDD in contemporary Hollywood films. The relevance and implications of such representations for occupational science are also considered.

There is ongoing debate around the use of language, in particular, whether it is preferable to use “disabled people” or People First language (e.g., people with IDD; see Titchkosky, 2011). In Canada, People First language is that chosen by self-advocates and other people with IDD and, in recognition and support, will be used in this article.

**Media, Occupational Participation, and Disability**

Ample literature illustrates the powerful influence of entertainment media on commonly held public stereotypes about people with disabilities—who they are and what they do (Black & Pretes, 2007; Garland-Thomson, 2009; Haller, 2010; Levers, 2001). Shakespeare (1999), citing “the power of images to define the experience of impairment, and to foster prejudicial attitudes towards disabled people” (p. 164), noted the historical distortion of disability discourses in representations of people with disabilities. Visual representations are especially important as they are generally presumed by audiences to represent truths about disability (Darke, 1998). Yet, what the viewer is given to be seen are often the dominant fictions about ability and disability. Despite good intentions and attempts by the film industry to portray disability in a positive, empowering light, depictions are generally not reflections of lived experience (Sarrett, 2011). Moreover, mainstream media, such as films, often provide the sole exposure, or experience, that nondisabled individuals have with people with disability, thus playing a critical role in creating social understandings and expectations (Farr, 1993).

This understanding of the powerful influence of media on individual attitudes and behavior has led to the growing recognition that “today’s media of mass communication—film and video… [could] be powerful agents of enlightenment” (Levers, 2001, Conclusion, para. 2). Telling different stories—ideally, stories told by people with disabilities themselves—can work to effect new understandings (Fudge Schormans, 2005). By offering more authentic images of the capabilities, experiences, and occupations of people with disabilities, mainstream media could work toward more informed, accepting, and inclusive attitudes and behavior toward people with IDD and facilitate improved occupational opportunities for them.

Individuals with IDD often encounter prejudice, discrimination, and stigma at the levels of public opinion, public systems, and public policy that impact their lives (Carll, 2003). They are often permitted little control over their own lives, even though most are more capable than is generally assumed. Research suggests they typically lack the opportunity (more than the ability) to express preferences and make choices in their lives (Fudge Schormans, Krause, MacDougall, & Wattie, 2011), including their occupational participation. These constraints can affect well-being and quality of life by limiting the scope, quantity, and quality of their occupational opportunities and participation (Renwick, 2004, in press). If such occupational deprivation is the case in the actual lives of people with IDD, how is this depicted in cinematic representations of their lives?

These reported experiences of individuals with IDD, combined with the documented influence of the media on attitudes and behavior, argue for an examination of the potential contribution of Hollywood films to the continued marginalization—or emancipation—of labeled individuals. While studies of people with physical and mental health disabilities in film do not explicitly address occupation, critiques of disability representations include references to depictions of the things people with disabilities do and the ways they do them. Commonly perpetuated stereotypes include film characters with mental health issues portrayed as “dangerous” and/or sexually deviant people (Levers, 2001). Characters with physical disabilities are often stereotypically portrayed as angry about their disabilities (Black & Pretes, 2007). Such unidimensional portrayals do not permit them to demonstrate other complex emotions and behaviors. Characters stereotyped as “incapable” are depicted as unable to make decisions, hold a job, or care (or direct care) for themselves without others’ help (Levers, 2001). Characters with disabilities are typically objectified such that their impairments are seen as their most important, if not only, characteristic (Haller, 2010). The central plots of film narratives often revolve around revenge or the search for a cure (Davis, 2002). Whether intended
as positive or negative, such portrayals ultimately serve to perpetuate tenacious stereotypes, damaging attitudes, and ignorance about the lived experience of disability (Haller, 2010), including participation in important, necessary, and satisfying occupations essential to a good quality of life.

Existing literature makes it clear that Hollywood has typically failed to present acceptable representations of disability (Haller, 2010; Mitchell & Snyder, 2001). Disability studies researchers argue that “negative” and “positive” representations, both current and historical, provide unacceptable portrayals of the lives and experiences of individuals with disabilities. So, then, what might constitute a more acceptable representation? To paraphrase disability activists, Hevey (1992) and Shakespeare (1994), an acceptable representation does not deny or suppress the struggle and oppression experienced by individuals with disabilities but, rather, represents these experiences as resulting from the interaction between individuals and their disabling environments/contexts. This is not about disability “correctness” or simply more “positive” representations but instead is a call for more authentic and even oppositional representations (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006) that challenge dominant discourses and the social, political, ideological, and psychological ramifications of contemporary cinematic representations of the lives of people with disabilities.

Limited representations of individuals with IDD have appeared throughout Hollywood film history, and until very recently, there has been only minimal critical analysis of these films with respect to the accuracy and/or breadth of these portrayals (Haller, 2010). There has been minimal analysis of depictions of people with IDD, but not of their occupational participation, in print media (e.g., Jones & Harwood, 2009). Analysis of occupation in other populations in other media is also rare (e.g., Wiseman, Davis, & Polatajko, 2005). However, no published studies have addressed occupational representations of individuals with IDD in film (or other media) and implications for their occupational potential. This lack of attention in the literature highlights the need for analysis of cinematic representations of IDD as distinct and separate from other kinds of disabilities and the need for an occupational perspective.

**Conceptual Foundations**

Perspectives from the literatures of occupation, disability, and media provided the three major, interrelated foundations underpinning this research.

**Occupational Perspective**

Occupational participation contributes to shaping identity, meeting individual and community goals and needs, and developing skills and resources, as well as meaning in life, health, and well-being (Christiansen & Townsend, 2010; Renwick, 2004). It is best understood as a dynamic process interweaving the person, the occupation(s), and the context (environment), rather than as three separate elements (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). Further, occupational participation requires the application of socially shared values and political will to develop a society that gives all of its members the chance to exercise their potential for occupational participation (Jakobsen, 2004). Thus, freedom to choose and actual access to participation in meaningful occupations are critical to individuals’ quality of life (Renwick, in press). Wicks (2005) defined occupational potential as “people’s capacity to do what they are required and have opportunity to do, to become who they have the potential to be” (p. 130) and argued that it may be unfulfilled if one is prevented or constrained from participating in meaningful occupations. For individuals from marginalized groups, realizing occupational potential can also be stifled by socially constructed barriers that restrict the spectrum of opportunities for meaningful occupational participation, putting individuals at significant risk for occupational deprivation (Wilcock, 2006) and a decreased sense of occupational competence and mastery (Renwick, 2004; Wicks, 2005).

**Disability Perspective**

From a disability studies perspective, what we understand to be “disability” is shaped by a given society’s attitudes, values, language, economies, and social and physical environments. Social representations of disability are thus manufactured—constructed by charities, science, and popular culture to show people with disabilities in particular ways and for particular purposes (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006). Important here is the concept of “normality,” a narrowly defined understanding of acceptable bodies and ways of being determined by societal and cultural values that requires and encourages those with power and resources to label those without as “abnormal,” as “other” (Davis, 2002). In contrast, medical conceptions of disability are grounded in an individualized, pathologized view of impairment and a focus on “cure” or “normalization” of the individual. These traditional perspectives problematize the individual, viewing disability as a personal tragedy originating in the individual, rather than socially created (Vehmas, 2002). Social models
of disability, on the other hand, problematize society rather than the individual, thus forcing an examination of cultural assumptions. Society creates disability as a problem: Consequently, society—not the individual—is responsible for alleviating or “fixing” the problem (Goodley, 2011).

**Media Perspective**

Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding framework for examining the mass communication process asserts that socially constructed messages are: (a) produced and disseminated through media, (b) decoded and interpreted by receivers as meaningful, (c) encoded based on receivers’ and societal perceptions, and (d) subsequently re-disseminated to others. The re-disseminated message may be similar to the original message (denotative meaning) or different from the original message (connotative meaning) and based on individual and societal associations and interpretations. However, given its origin in dominant social discourse, it resembles the original message more often than not. As messages cycle through this ongoing process, they are further integrated into social discourse, which in turn, drives the media, and the cycle begins anew.

**Research Question**

The three conceptual strands noted are rooted in the disciplines of occupational science, disability studies, and media studies, respectively, but they share an emphasis on a social constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2006) to marginalization, representation, and meaning-making, which were drawn together to underpin this research. The overarching research question guiding this qualitative study was: How are individuals with IDD occupationally portrayed in contemporary Hollywood films? In keeping with current conceptions of occupational participation, representations of people with IDD participating in occupations (i.e., occupational portrayals) were conceived of as film depictions of the person participating in an occupation in a context together as a dynamic process (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). The goal of the research was to explore multiple dimensions of occupational portrayals of people with IDD and begin to build a more complex, holistic picture of their cinematic representation.

**Method**

Film representations are most commonly explored using qualitative methods to identify major themes (Giles, 2003). In this study, text/image content specific to occupational participation as portrayed in films that met a set of inclusion criteria was systematically selected and analyzed to identify major emergent themes. Inductive data analysis was used to make sense of and interpret portrayals of occupational participation by fictional characters with IDD in terms of the meanings both society and individuals attribute to them (Charmaz, 2006). To identify, capture, and examine the influence of personal perspective and values on the research (e.g., methods developed, data collection, analysis, interpretation), each author maintained a journal recording subjective observations and emotional responses related to the research process and film content throughout the study.

**Inclusion Criteria and Film Selection**

Careful sample selection, guided by the study design, is required in qualitative research because samples are typically small and purposive (Levers, 2001). Further, there are very few Hollywood films portraying central or major characters with IDD. Thus, the process of film selection required extensive internet database searches and ongoing discussion among the authors and their colleagues to identify films portraying people with IDD. Database searches used a range of keywords, for example: intellectual disability, developmental disability, mental retardation, learning disabilities (used in the United Kingdom), mental handicap, cognitive impairment, Asperger syndrome, Down syndrome, developmental disorders, and developmental delay (as well as any alternatives and variants of these terms and other common and “slang” terms); and films, movies, media, images, and representations. The search was further delimited by the time period, 1999 to present, and English-language materials. Both relevant scholarly interdisciplinary and discipline-specific databases (e.g., PubMed, EBSCO, EMBASE, OVID, Scopus, Google Scholar, Film and TV Literature Index, PsycInfo, Sociological Abstracts) and general and disability-specific film databases (e.g., SproutFlix, Disability Movies, Media and Disability Resources, Internet Movie Database, Netflix movie listings) were searched. Identification and initial viewing of each potential film to include was followed by discussion among the authors of its suitability to the study.

After 14 such films were viewed, inclusion criteria for film selection were refined. Each of the eight films selected for analysis met these refined inclusion criteria: English language, contemporary, mainstream Hollywood film; based in North American culture; fictional film; and a lead or major character had an IDD of adult age clearly and repeatedly
shown participating in occupations. Because these films were screened in North American mainstream, public movie theatres, they were likely to have been widely viewed by diverse audiences and, consequently, would be likely to have a high social impact in terms of disseminating messages about IDD (Levers, 2001). Since these films were released between 1999 and 2009, they are likely to reflect the recent state of social discourse related to individuals with IDD. The films selected were: *Molly* (MacDonald & Duigan, 1999), *The Other Sister* (Iscovich, Rose, & Marshall, 1999), *I Am Sam* (Nelson, Solomon, Herscovitz, Zwick, & Nelson, 2001), *Radio* (Tollin, Robbins, Gains, & Tollin, 2003), *House of D* (Rosenthal, Yari, Lewis, & Duchovny, 2005), *Adam* (Urdang, De Pencier, Vanech, & Mayer, 2009), *Snowcake* (Carter, Daniel, Eaton, Fichman, & Evans, 2006), and *Defendor* (Tabarrock & Stebbings, 2009). The Table provides the plot summaries of the films. The characters are either portrayed as having diagnostic labels such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) or an unspecified IDD.

**Data Collection**

During the film identification/selection process, a specific occupation-focused tool addressing the overall research question was developed to guide data collection from the eight films (i.e., selection for analysis of scenes dealing with occupational participation by characters with IDD). It was created to promote consistency and ensure relevance of the data to the overall research question. It consisted of a set of questions and sub-questions analogous to semi-structured questions and probes used to interview and gather data from human participants. Its development was a multi-stage process including repeated viewings of the films and ongoing personal reflection by the authors to identify, modify, and refine emergent questions about occupational participation by the characters with IDD. Examples of these questions (and sub-questions) were: (a) What is the nature of the occupational participation? Who selected it? With whom is the occupation done? (e.g., with important others? strangers? peers? alone?); (b) How is this occupational participation viewed (e.g., meaningful/value/appropriate or not to the character? to others in the character’s life? in Western culture?); (c) How is the occupation carried out?; and (d) Nature of opportunities (if any) for occupational participation portrayed? These questions constituted the occupation-focused tool to guide the collection of data from the eight films.

Each film was viewed at least twice by each author. Throughout each viewing, films were repeatedly paused and rewound, as necessary, to facilitate capture of relevant data. Special attention was paid to selected scenes dealing with clear occupational participation by the character with IDD.

**Data Analysis**

In accordance with grounded theory methods for coding of data (Charmaz, 2006; Willis, 2007) to identify major conceptual themes, analysis began simultaneously with data collection. Systematic examination of the data (i.e., scenes selected from each film) involved repeated viewing of the film footage, especially the scenes selected for analysis. Using constant comparison of data, both within and across films, facilitated identification of recurring occupational portrayals, as well as additional relevant scenes from the films for further analysis. As the iterative analysis progressed, similar scenes and elements from the scenes within each film and across the eight films were identified and assigned codes. For example, Linda (*Snowcake*) repeatedly shelves grocery items at work and Sam (*I Am Sam*) routinely replenishes condiments in the coffee shop where he works. The code “repetitive routines” was assigned to these two scenes and similar others. Eventually, this code was combined/recombined with others to form the Simplification of Occupational Participation conceptual theme. This code was then applied to similar footage in the subsequent scenes analyzed in each film. New categories with other codes continued to be identified in the same manner (Charmaz, 2006; Willis, 2007). The categories identified were repeatedly linked, combined, and refined (and renamed) as they emerged from the analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to yield higher-level themes that were further similarly refined through ongoing reflection and regular, detailed discussion among the authors. Ultimately, this process identified the emergent conceptual themes (i.e., Simplification of Occupational Participation, Infantilization, and sub-themes presented in the next section), which addressed the research question and revealed underlying meaning (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) related to occupational participation.

**Trustworthiness.** The trustworthiness of the study was established in several ways, as recommended by Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993). The research process was systematic, emergent, and involved prolonged engagement with the material. It also involved considerable reflection, ongoing peer debriefing among authors, and consultation with academic experts (i.e., in disability studies, occupational science, occupational therapy, media studies).
Findings

For clarity, each film title and its associated main character with IDD are Radio, Radio; I Am Sam, Sam; Molly, Molly; The Other Sister, Carla; Adam, Adam; House of D, Pappass; Snowcake, Linda; and Defender, Arthur.

Descriptive Findings

Examination of the recurring occupational portrayals in the films revealed two clear groupings, participation in leisure and productivity, but little attention to self-care.

Leisure and Productivity. Most leisure and productive occupational participation portrayed involved everyday occupations in which many, or most, individuals in Western societies might choose to engage. Occupational participation differed in terms of benefits offered and skills required. Participation in common leisure occupations included socializing with others, watching television and movies, listening to music, and dancing. Some occupational participation was simple and some more complex such that it was possible to participate in a range of ways. The benefits were generally pleasure and social interaction, with few risks involved.

Participation in recurring productive occupations included primarily paid or voluntary work, study-
ing, and shopping. Sam worked in a paid position at a coffee shop. Radio did voluntary work at the local high school, eventually becoming a student there. Molly and Carla engaged in studying and shopping. Arthur worked on a construction site by day and was a vigilante crime fighter by night (a voluntary position neither sanctioned nor condoned by local police). Pappas held two paid positions, as a school caretaker and a restaurant delivery person. Adam designed computer programs at a toy manufacturing company, and Linda worked part-time stocking store shelves. Participation in such productive occupations had the potential to be complex, challenging, and demanding of both intellectual and physical skills, to varying degrees. The benefits derived were sometimes monetary (e.g., paid work) and generally provided a sense of accomplishment and personal value, and fostered self-esteem and independence. With one exception, Arthur’s crime fighting, the most powerful risk accompanying participation in these occupations was the potential for failure and consequent loss of self-esteem and income. Adam, for example, was let go from one position (but eventually secured another), and at one point, Pappas’ job was at risk.

It is noteworthy that all eight films implied that the characters with IDD participated in self-care occupations, since all were generally well-groomed, had clean and organized living spaces (except Arthur who, lacking housing, lived in a construction storage building), and were obviously getting adequate nutrition. However, how or by whom self-care occupations were accomplished was typically not evident, except for Adam and Linda, who were both shown cooking and whose fastidious care of their homes was explicit.

**Occupational Participation and Choice.** Characters with IDD were generally shown as having some limited freedom to make choices regarding meaningful occupational participation. For instance, Sam chose to work at a coffee shop but had no choice over his position there. He was free to listen to his favorite music or eat in his favorite restaurant, although whether this was influenced by his income was not made clear. Radio chose to listen to the radio and to do voluntary, unpaid work with the local high school’s sports teams, but was not offered paid work there. Molly watched films and read books of her own choosing. Carla convinced her parents to let her attend classes at a polytechnical school and had some freedom to socialize. Adam appeared to enjoy his job (which his father had secured for him) and participated in other occupations clearly of his own choosing (e.g., enjoying nature, learning about the universe). Similarly, Linda appeared comfortable with her job and engaged in it with much seriousness, but the viewer is given no information as to whether she or someone else chose this position for her. Arthur begrudgingly worked on the construction site while viewing his vigilante activities as his true vocation. Pappas appeared, for the most part, to enjoy participating in his paid occupations. He was shown choosing to socialize with his “best friend,” but it is not clear if he desired and/or had opportunities for other friendships. Further, the characters were all represented as having varying degrees of independence. Most of the recurring occupational participation identified in these films is valued by Western culture, and individuals of all social classes and educational levels typically engage in these, or similar, occupations. In addition, all eight characters had close ties with at least one family member or significant individual in their lives who provided ongoing social support, thereby facilitating their continued success in their chosen occupational participation.

**“Positive” Portrayal of Occupational Participation.** Over the course of each film, most of the characters with IDD were portrayed as gaining increased independence and becoming empowered, with their life circumstances and well-being noticeably improving by the end of each film. Yet, this was not the case for Pappas who maintained his job but struggled with alcohol misuse. Linda’s life situation remained largely unchanged in the film; the most significant changes occurred for others. Arthur was killed at the film’s end as a result of his participation in vigilante occupations.

At first glance, viewers might conclude that these films represented individuals with IDD in a “positive” light, thus challenging mainstream perceptions, which may have been consistent with the filmmakers’ intentions. However, more critical, in-depth investigation of the occupational portrayal of these characters led to further insights.

**Major Emergent Conceptual Themes and Sub-Themes**

Examination of the commonly recurring patterns of occupational participation by the characters with IDD revealed two powerful emergent themes, specifically, these characters: (a) participated in potentially complex occupations in simplified ways and (b) were infantilized in relation to their occupational participation.

**Simplification of Occupational Participation.** This theme refers to the portrayal of participation in complex adult occupations in a noticeably sim-
plified or less sophisticated way, or both. While the degree of simplification varied among films, occupational participation was frequently characterized by simple, repetitive, routine tasks requiring normal motor function, with any requirement for reasoning and judgment virtually eliminated. For more complicated occupational participation, the character was shown as obviously struggling with these complexities. Although such simplification was apparent in the portrayal of leisure participation, it was particularly striking in the characters’ participation in productive occupations. Since Western society judges an individual’s value by his or her participation in primary productive occupations, this finding is significant.

Examples of this kind of simplification were evident in depictions of Sam and Radio as they engaged in their paid and voluntary jobs, respectively. Sam worked at a coffee shop where, typically, employees are involved in a variety of occupations. However, Sam was most often shown cleaning or organizing sugar packets. He was portrayed as desperate to participate in more complex occupations, primarily to prove to the family court that he is responsible enough to have custody of his daughter. After pleading with his supervisor, he was promoted to a customer service position. However, on his first attempt to carry out these more complex duties, Sam was unable to handle the challenges and stress associated with the pace of work required. Ultimately, he was shown failing in a spectacular fashion. In interpreting this film footage, it is important to understand its salient contextual features. In addition to Sam being anxious about having to attend family court on this same day, Sam was never shown receiving any training or support before or after his promotion and assumption of increased responsibilities.

Radio worked as a volunteer assistant for a high school’s football team, distributing equipment during team practices, cleaning up after players, and folding towels. When some players staged an unkind trick on Radio, he failed to recognize their deception and, consequently, found himself in trouble with several irate female students, the coach, and the principal. Arthur’s duties at his construction job entailed no more than holding a stop sign.

Notable exceptions were Adam’s loss of his first job because his computer design for a toy doll was much more sophisticated than the toymaker required, and his demonstrated ability at a second job included explaining the complex, technical aspects of astronomy to visitors at an observatory.

Infantilization and Three Sub-Themes. The term infantilization, as used in this article, refers to the immature or child-like quality or nature of occupational participation. This theme manifested in three interrelated sub-themes: (a) participation in an occupation typically intended for children; (b) participating in a traditionally adult occupation in a child-like manner; and (c) demonstrating an exaggerated child-like response to occupational participation.

Although all of the characters with IDD were approximately 20 to 50 years old, they were shown participating in occupations typically intended for children. While adults, with and without disabilities, may occasionally participate in some of these occupations, they are not traditionally viewed as adult occupations. For example, Sam has a bedtime story read to him by his 6-year-old daughter, Lucy. In many scenes, Radio rode around town on a shopping cart. Molly splashed in a public water fountain while nondisabled others present do not and look on in disapproval or bemusement. Carla spent many hours repetitively stringing very simple beaded necklaces for her family. Pappass, a middle-aged man, played childish tricks on an older woman with the teenager who was his best friend. Linda liked to jump on a trampoline and play with sparkly toys, and Adam often sat in the park watching the raccoons. For both Linda and Adam, nondisabled onlookers (at least initially) reacted disparagingly or with condescension.

Several characters also engaged in pretend or imaginary play. For example, Sam imagined he was a Beatle (i.e., of rock star fame). Radio pretended to be a football player. Molly dressed up and played at being Scarlet O’Hara, from Gone with the Wind. Carla held a seemingly sophisticated tea party with her teddy bear in her new apartment. Arthur would dress up in his homemade superhero costume, but while his costume and superhero character (Defendor) were make-believe, his occupational participation went beyond the imaginary for Arthur when he wandered the city at night looking for “bad guys” to punish.

While some aspects of such occupational participation are valued by mainstream Western societies and are often associated with wealth, status, or respect (e.g., being a celebrity/hero or a jewelry maker), several contextual aspects of the characters’ participation provided additional layers of meaning. These occupations, typically performed by children, were carried out by characters with IDD but not by the nondisabled adult characters in each film. The responses of most nondisabled characters also clearly showed cultural assumptions as to what is, and is not, “normal” and “appropriate” adult occupational
participation. There was a cumulative effect of such portrayals, with repeated instances throughout each film depicting the characters with IDD participating in occupations generally associated with childhood. At the same time, other aspects of their occupational participation were markedly different from that of nondisabled adults portrayed in each film.

The characters with IDD were sometimes represented as participating in a variety of occupations typically associated with adults (e.g., intimate adult relationships, shopping for shoes for a child). However, these occupations were most often performed in a child-like manner. That is, their occupational participation is depicted as childish and simplified, and does not command respect or positive interest from nondisabled others in the film. In fact, it is noteworthy that the responses of nondisabled others are generally negative, showing disapproval, dismay, negative judgments, disgust, or bewilderment. This sub-theme was exemplified by the characters’ sheer abandon; exaggerated concentration and intense focus beyond what was required; the innocent or awkward nature of their occupational participation; or some combination of these. The preponderance of such portrayals also stood in marked contrast to the frequency of scenes in which the characters participated in adult occupations in ways indistinguishable from nondisabled adult characters and garnering them societal approval instead of censure. For example, in a scene at the coffee shop, Sam intensely focused on organizing sugar packets and mugs. He also childishly repeated the same line, “that’s a wonderful choice,” in response to all customers’ selections, regardless of what they chose or said to him. Sam also became consumed with, and lost in, his Beatles impersonations at his daughter’s Halloween party. As other child and adult guests looked on in bewildered curiosity, Lucy, recognizing that her father’s behavior was inappropriate for an adult in that context, was acutely embarrassed.

In another scene, while shopping for Lucy’s new shoes for school, Sam and his friends, all of whom have IDD, created comedic chaos in the shop by suggesting wildly unsuitable shoes for a little girl. Soon after, they are seen parading in the street with balloons and great abandon (in a childish parody of the Beatles’ Abbey Road album cover). Linda was portrayed sitting cross-legged on a shop floor, intensely focused on stocking canned goods on the shelves. Pappass cavorted on a bicycle with his teenaged best friend while making restaurant deliveries. Carla and her boyfriend, Daniel, awkwardly kissed and embraced in a manner reminiscent of stereotypically innocent preadolescents. Adam’s first foray into a sexual relationship was marked by his portrayal as a child-like innocent.

Finally, the eight characters appeared in many film scenes expressing their pleasure or enjoyment in occupational participation with exaggerated child-like responses or in ways that went beyond how even a child might usually respond. This behavior, which included screaming, hooting, squealing, jumping, clapping, wildly flinging hands in the air, or a slack-jawed expression (open mouth), was clearly considered inappropriate by nondisabled adult characters. Although some adults may occasionally express enjoyment or pleasure in similar ways, adults generally inhibit such responses because they are regarded as inappropriate in the social contexts shown in these films. For example, Radio laughed, hooted, and exuberantly threw his hands in the air during his many shopping cart rides. Molly was shown jumping, squealing, and waving her hands in the air when playing with great abandon in a public water fountain as onlookers watched in amusement or disgust. Sam frequently laughed very loudly and clapped his hands inappropriately. At her sister’s wedding, Carla watched the ceremony, her mouth open in amazement, in direct contrast to the more typical behavior exhibited by other adult guests. Linda clapped, laughed, and jumped around when presented with a new toy with flashing lights and whirring sounds, and also did so upon hearing a favorite song at the wake for her deceased daughter while some guests looked aghast and attempted to stop her.

Discussion

The portrayals examined in this study may have some accuracy with respect to occupational participation by some people with IDD. However, each person with IDD is unique and has individual experiences, needs, abilities, and perceptions, including those associated with occupational participation. In contrast, in the eight films analyzed, a preponderance of scenes represented all adults with IDD as child-like and typically requiring significant simplification of occupational participation in order for them to succeed. Thus, in a reductive way, these eight films disseminate some damaging messages that perpetuate the disabling cycle of social discourse, tenacious stereotypes, and subsequent behavior toward people so labeled. They reinforce beliefs common to Western societies and widely held by individual members of society, which maintain an inherently flawed distinction between normal and abnormal (Vehmas, 2002). Such messages are most effectively rendered by the primarily negative re-
sponses of the nondisabled characters toward the characters with IDD.

According to social models of disability, if occupational participation by individuals with IDD is child-like, it is often because society has allowed them few other choices or none at all. Society continues to define and shape who they are by unconsciously and consciously limiting opportunities and often creating insurmountable barriers, including those related to occupational participation. Cinematic representations inform viewers about, and are informed by, what society perceives as suitable or acceptable occupational participation both for “normal” adults and for individuals with IDD. In this way, the eight films analyzed contribute to the perpetuation of socially devalued roles and participation in devalued or socially inappropriate occupations for people with IDD. For example, viewers are led to assume that because they have this kind of impairment, Sam can be neither a successful coffee barista nor a good father, and Carla should not have an adult sexual relationship. Thus, viewers anticipate the characters’ failure with respect to participation in occupations by which Western society typically judges an individual’s value. In turn, such expectations reinforce an individual pathologizing perspective and support viewers’ beliefs about the limitations of people with IDD. By focusing on the individual, such expectations also serve to divert viewers’ attention from their abilities and their potential for successful occupational participation when the appropriate supports are provided and in place.

Yet the films rarely problematize these cultural assumptions. Ableist notions of normal/abnormal, appropriate/inappropriate, and abled/disabled remain generally unquestioned and are, indeed, reinforced by the negative responses of nondisabled characters in the films. Viewers are shown only a limiting and reductive picture of occupational participation by adults with IDD. Reinforcing normalcy as the goal, the films typically fail to create space for valuation of difference. While occupational participation by people with IDD has been very much determined by a lack of opportunity, it must also be considered that, for some people with IDD, their impairments necessitate a simpler means of participation (Kittay, 2001). A rigid focus on normalization ideologies for people with IDD can be restrictive and denies all of us opportunities for different ways of being and participation in occupation that are, or should be, valued. In this way, film viewers are further distracted from recognition and consideration of the larger social, material, political, economic, and environmental barriers that, more than individual function, restrict and limit occupational participation for people with IDD. People with IDD continue to be seen as different, as lesser than, and thus, the taken-for-granted binaries of normal/abnormal, us/them are maintained. These attitudes do not arise from what most nondisabled individuals think or do consciously but, rather, are inherent in what they believe and how they have learned to behave.

There were, however, a few notable exceptions in the films viewed. For example, Arthur’s child-like superhero costume, makeshift weapons, and comic-book sayings initially elicit laughter from nondisabled characters in the film. However, when his methods begin to work to incapacitate the nondisabled criminals, perceptions shift, and he is no longer regarded as a comical and childish figure engaging in harmless make-believe. In a related vein, as Adam’s nondisabled girlfriend, Beth, comes to know Adam and to understand how he experiences ASD, she grows increasingly less tolerant of others’ negative and dismissive attitudes and behaviors toward him, which serves to effectively trouble those negative responses. Similarly, in Snowcake, the nondisabled character, Alex, gradually develops an understanding and respect for Linda’s ways of being in the world. As the film progresses, he attends less to Linda’s behavior and more to that of other nondisabled characters who react to her in hurtful and disparaging ways. In challenging the ablest prejudice and discriminatory behaviors of nondisabled characters, the characters Beth and Alex simultaneously push nondisabled viewers to question their own assumptions about IDD.

**Significance of the Research**

This was, by definition, a small-scale study intended as a preliminary step toward a larger, more complex study of media portrayals of people with IDD and their occupational participation. While the findings cannot be generalized to cinematic representations beyond those in the films analyzed for this study, a key strength of the study is its direct and explicit occupational focus and its contribution to addressing the cinematic occupational portrayal of individuals with IDD. Furthermore, the findings challenge conventional and stereotypical media portrayals of people with IDD and the nature of their occupational participation in critical arenas of society. They also highlight specific cinematic stereotypes that, pending further research evidence from future studies, can be targeted for change.
Implications

Stereotyping in Hollywood film reinforces prejudice and discrimination and can influence individual and societal attitudes, behaviors, and preferences regarding individuals with IDD (Levers, 2001; Shakespeare, 1999). In that no one is immune to this cultural influence, there are important implications for practitioners working and allying with people with IDD (Goodley & Tragaskis, 2006). The negative aspects of this influence are embodied in environmental and social barriers in critical arenas, for example, occupational participation in community, employment, and educational contexts, that may unknowingly and unwittingly be maintained or reinforced by practitioners, including occupational therapists. Cinematic representations inform public and professional perceptions of desired and appropriate participation for labeled individuals that potentially impact their access to meaningful occupation. Barriers to such participation may result in occupational alienation and deprivation, which ultimately affect the occupational potential of individuals with IDD (Renwick, 2004; Wicks, 2005; Wilcock, 2006).

The research findings pose a challenge: specifically, to acknowledge disability as a societal problem, not a personal tragedy nor solely a medical concern. Thus, they challenge nondisabled or differently disabled practitioners and researchers to examine their own assumptions about IDD and people so labeled. If knowledge of what constitutes meaningful, appropriate, and possible occupational participation for labeled individuals is informed by unexamined or unquestioned public attitudes, perceptions, and representations (e.g., cinematic representations), there exists a serious risk of perpetuating existing, or creating additional, occupational barriers for individuals labeled as having IDD. It is essential that practitioners and researchers view representations of labeled groups in a systematic way and with a critical eye to inform filmmakers and contribute to changes in societal beliefs and attitudes about members of labeled groups, including those with IDD.

Future Research Directions

The findings point to the need for further research in this area. Future research could include using similar methods with a larger sample of films or films in different categories (e.g., documentaries), focused on other age groups (e.g., children with IDD), from different time periods, or from different cultures. Many insights may also be gained through participatory action research centered on the perspectives of individuals with IDD concerning cinematic representations of people with IDD. The idea that individuals are disabled only to the extent that society disables them highlights the danger of casting researchers and practice professionals (e.g., in occupational therapy and other human services) as experts (Goodley & Tragaskis, 2006). There is growing support for the inclusion of people with IDD in research based on the argument that the problem has rested not with labeled people, but with researchers’ assumptions and methodological failure (Gilbert, 2004). The current findings point to the importance of studying, and then widely disseminating, knowledge about the lived experience of IDD learned from individuals with IDD themselves. Qualitative research on the lived experiences of individuals with IDD concerning their occupational participation would also help develop a more accurate standard for acceptable cinematic representations for this group of labeled adults. For example, participatory research now being conducted by the first two authors and co-researchers with IDD focuses on contrasting contemporary film representations and lived experiences of IDD.

Conclusion

“Media shape our reality and functions as the gatekeeper of our perceptions of the world” (Carll, 2003, p. 1592). Researchers engaged in studying occupation are well positioned and eminently qualified to: (a) evaluate and, when necessary, challenge socially constructed ideas about meaningful and valued occupational participation for disenfranchised groups of people; (b) promote the use of media as a positive force in social change; and (c) identify the characteristics of appropriate representations of people in disenfranchised groups, such as individuals with IDD. Applying an occupational lens to the composite definition based on Hevey’s (1992) and Shakespeare’s (1994) conceptions of what constitutes an acceptable representation points to the addition of a critical occupational dimension (added in italics below) to this criterion of acceptability:

An acceptable representation does not deny or suppress the oppression experienced by individuals with disabilities, as exemplified by the occupations in which they are permitted to participate and in which they do participate, but reveals the struggle and oppression as resulting from the interaction between individuals and the disabling environments within which they function.

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