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Reel Talk: Deconstructing Communication Disorders in A Sampling of Modern Films

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REEL TALK: DECONSTRUCTING COMMUNICATION
DISORDERS IN A SAMPLING
OF MODERN FILMS

A Thesis

by

LISA M. BECCERA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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May 2010

Major Subject: Communication Sciences and Disorders

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DISORDERS IN A SAMPLING
OF MODERN FILMS

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May 2010

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ABSTRACT

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This study focused on films that depicted characters that had a communication disorder or characters that have a disability which resulted in a communication disorder. This study examined types of communication disorders depicted in films and the accuracy to which communication disorders are portrayed in films. Thirty films were used in this study and 32 characters were found to have communication disorders. The author used qualitative methods and quantitative methods to examine and deconstruct the depiction of communication disorders in modern films. This paper also illustrates the effective and efficient manner films can be used to educate society and college students at both the undergraduate and graduate level about communication disorders.

DEDICATION

Words cannot express the immense amount of gratitude and appreciation I have for the two of the most amazing parents I could have ever asked for. The culmination of sleepless nights that led to the completion of my thesis studies was endured by their side and would have been possible without their love and support. My parents, America and Juan Beccera, have given me the inspiration and motivation to accomplish this degree, *gracias*. Thank you for your patience, advice, hugs and love. My brothers, Isai (I'll always remember to "TRUST") and Abrams ("What it do, what it be!"), have always provided comical relief in the middle of tough circumstances, Thanks for the laughter and love. The journey has been arduous and our feet are now tired but you have taught me to keep on walking and never give up, thank you. This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine. I would also like thank God for his unfailing love and amazing grace, "for great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord" (Psalm 117).

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There were times when the road was weary and the finish line was nowhere in sight but each and every one of you provided the extra push (in different ways) I needed to keep moving forward and finish. Thank you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION	1
Preface	1
Purpose of Study	6
Significance	6
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE	7
Background.....	8
Historical Overview.....	8
Portrayal of Communication Disorders in Films.....	10
Using Films depicting Communication Disorders in the Classroom.....	13
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS.....	17
Methodology	17
Findings	21

CHAPTER IV. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH.....	42
Conclusion	42
Future Research	43
REFERENCES	50
APPENDIX	56
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	60

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: Literature Pertaining to Communication Disorders in Film.....	11
Table 2: Method 2: Safran’s Modified Format Used to Evaluate Accuracy of Communication Disorder.....	19
Table 3: Character Portrayal of Communication Disorder.....	21

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Percentage of Characters with Communication Disorders.....	22

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Preface

“Listen don’t you let anyone ever tell you have a handicap,” an elderly war veteran tells Edward Scissorhands during a neighborhood BBQ. His puzzled face accepts an old man’s recommendation and continues to use his “hands” as skewers for shish kabobs over the BBQ pit. Meanwhile, friendly neighbor, Joyce made her way over and seductively said “Who’s handicapped? My goodness! Don’t be ridiculous you’re not handicapped. What do they call that? *Exceptional*” (Di Novi & Burton, 1990).

The film *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) depicts Edward (Johnny Depp), a unique individual, who has scissors at the end of each arm instead of hands. His inventor (Vincent Price) dies before he is able to give Edward hands. Edward lived a monastic existence until Peg Boggs (Diane Wiest), an Avon lady, adopted him and took him to live in the pastel paradise of suburbia (“Edward Scissorhands”, n.d.). While Edward’s disability is evident, he has scissors for hands, he is accepted into a nice family and ultimately into their suburban community. When the viewer takes a closer look at Edward’s disability underneath his leather attire and pale skin lies an expressive language disorder. Edward rarely speaks and uses phrases, never complete sentences (Jackson, 1991). Throughout the entire film Edward only speaks 169 words (“Edward Scissorhands”, n.d.). Edward also has difficulty understanding figures of speech and humor. “It was a figure of speech Ed... You gotta learn not to take things so literally,”

Bill said during the BBQ (Di Novi & Burton, 1990). He is like a child in a new environment. After Edward is arrested he is evaluated by a doctor. The type of evaluation that was conducted is not specified but the doctor said, “The years spent in isolation have not equipped him with the tools necessary to judge right from wrong. He’s had no context. He’s been completely without guidance...His awareness of what we call reality is completely underdeveloped” (Di Novi & Burton, 1990). Edward’s intellectual acumen is also questioned after he’s arrested, when Jim tells Kim, ‘My old man thinks he’s retarded otherwise he’s still be in jail’ (Clarke, 2008, p. 96). Edward’s inability to socialize or to touch another human being and his exceptional abilities in one particular area parallel the symptoms of Asperger’s Syndrome (Clarke, 2008; Sampson 2004). According to Cory Sampson, “Individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome desire social interaction, but are unable to perform socially due to this deficit in interpreting subtle and unwritten social rules” (Cory, 2004, p. 1). Edward is unable to connect with an individual on a reciprocative and empathetic level (Cory, 2004). The scissors represent an individual with Asperger’s “attempt to compensate for social deficit with other more advanced mental faculties” (Cory, 2004, p. 1). Who is to say that if Edward received speech therapy he would have had a more effective way of communicating his wants and needs and understanding the new world around him?

Films such as *Edward Scissorhands*, have the capacity to offer more than simple escapism. *Edward Scissorhands*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Benny and Joon*, *Forest Gump* and many others have displayed a myriad of disabilities and disorders. In *A Beautiful Mind* Russell Crowe portrayed Nobel Prize-winning John Forbes Nash who is diagnosed with schizophrenia (Timmons, 2003). In the film *Benny & Joon*, Benny (Aidan Quinn) cared

for his sister Joon (Mary Stuart Masterson), who had a mental illness. He also inherited the care of Sam (Johnny Depp), who had a personality disorder (Timmons, 2003). In the motion picture *Forest Gump* Tom Hanks portrayed Forest Gump, a man with a developmental disability on his way to see his lost love and tells his life story to others as he sits at a bus stop (Timmons, 2003). These are only a few of the thousands of films that portray some type of disability (McLeod, 2008). Movies have the capacity to take the viewer to unknown places and “inside the skin of people quite different from ourselves”, offering a window into a “wider world, broadening our perspective and opening our eyes to new wonders” (McCracken, 2010, p. 1).

Roberts and Wallace (2001) place great importance on the crucial contribution of cinema to society. The authors state that film should be studied because:

1. *Cinema is an essential part of popular culture*
2. *Cinema is a national multinational and global institution*
3. *Film was, is and will remain a medium of messages and values*
4. *Film is a Language*
5. *Textual and contextual analysis is a transferable skill*

(Roberts & Wallace, 2001, p. 1-2).

Several film theorists and writers have provided their own description of the “cinematic window” (e.g., Andre Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer). Andre Bazin, renowned French film theorist and film critic theorized that the film image hinted at a vast reality that is part of an infinite prolonged universe (McCracken, 2010). Cinema was believed to be “objectivity in time” that represented a reality of things onscreen even more real than our experience of them in “real life” (McCracken, 2010 p. 1). The screen acts as a

window to a visual representation of an authentic experience. C.S. Lewis, Irish-born British novelist, stated that art functions as a “window” onto worlds unseen. Each perspective is selective to the individual viewer. Therefore movies can offer authentic experiences into different disabilities and communication disorders. According to McCracken (2010) Siegfried Kracauer, a German-Jewish writer, cultural critic and film theorist, agreed that the film image was by nature “undetermined, ambiguous and open-ended- a fragment of reality suggesting endlessness” (p. 1). Furthermore, there are endless possibilities to the use and interpretation of film. Cinema is seen as more than just a window because film serves as a magnifying glass that focuses the viewer’s attention on everyday reality that is seen for its magnificence and curiosity. The everyday reality of communication disorders in films opens a new window into the lives of people with communication disorders and society’s perception and treatment of them (Tanner, 2003).

According to Tanner the role of media, in this case film, has done a commendable job in educating and informing people about the nature, course, and symptoms of a variety of communication disorders (Tanner, 2003). Films have propagated stereotypes and dispelled myths about communication disorders (Tanner, 2003). Communication disorders are often used to better entertain the audience:

“Part of the entertainment value of a film can be an actor’s use of sign language and lip reading, as seen in children of a Lesser god. Mental deficiency and autism gave interest to characters in *Forrest Gump* and *Rain Man*, and Leon Phelps, in *The Ladies Man*, lisps on virtually every word with an /s/ in it. His lisping in this movie gives him an unusual and unique persona.” (Tanner, 2003, p.23)

Hollywood has been criticized for portraying communication disorders in a humorous manner and activist groups have demanded that Hollywood make “certain communication disorders off-limits or portray them in a positive way” (Tanner, 2003, p. 23-24).

This study focused on films that depicted characters with a communication disorder or characters that have a disability which resulted in a communication disorder. Quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used to study the depiction of communication disorders.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined the accuracy to which communication disorders are portrayed in films. The author used qualitative methods and quantitative methods to examine and deconstruct the depiction of communication disorders in modern films. The author also demonstrated the effective and efficient manner films can be used to educate society and future students about communication disorders.

Significance

Information derived from this study may prove to be useful to teach future students about communication disorders and has the capacity to express the influence of films depicting communication disorders on society as a whole. The study may also prove to be beneficial to researchers, instructors who teach higher education and other professionals within the scope of speech language-pathology.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Disability portrayal in film has transcended beyond the silver screen into the classroom and impacted different facets of society (Byrd & Elliot 1988; Safran, 1998; Tanner, 2003). It is estimated that 1-in-5 U.S. residents (19%) have at least one disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). This percentage translates to 49.7 million individuals age five and over with disabilities in the civilian noninstitutionalized population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau). According to Ruben (2000) (as cited in Tanner, 2003) prevalence of communication disorders in the United States ranges between 5% and 10%. Hearing loss and deafness are the most common communication disorders (Tanner, 1994 as cited in Tanner 2003). Speech and language disorders are more prevalent in children. On average 1 in 6 Americans have a communication disorder (Bello, 1995 as cited in Tanner, 2003). The prevalence of communication disorders in the United States is expected to increase (Tanner). As the number of individuals with disabilities increases the number of films portraying individuals with disabilities has also increased. Films have provided diverse perspectives of this unique population. The following literature depicts individuals with communication disorders, communication disorder/disability portrayal in films and the benefit of the using films in institutions of higher learning.

Background

A review of the literature is needed to understand an account of the broad scope of disabilities in films before narrowing it to the disabilities directly related to communication disorders. This review illustrates a historical overview of disabilities in film, quantitative investigations, qualitative studies, and the use of films in classrooms as a tool for learning through Social Learning Theory. There was a limited amount of literature in the area communication disorders in films. The University of Texas Pan-American, Northern Arizona University, University of North Carolina, EBSCO databases, and multiple search engines were used to locate materials for this study. Articles and books were taken from 1988 to 2010.

Historical Overview of Disability Portrayal in Films

Historically films portraying individuals with disabilities have shown a variety of trends. Slapstick comedies and melodramas often presented a victim or villain as the individual with the disability who was seeking revenge (Safran, 1998). After the 1929 stock market crash, physical disabilities were also seen less favorably (Safran, 1998). According to Safran, the post World War II period - late 1940s - depicted physical disabilities with greater sensitivity. Traditional United States values of family support and self-determination became more evident as the individual overcame their impairments. Films in the 1960s portrayed individuals with physical impairments that “appeared in the mainstream, facing obstacles to live independently” (Safran, 1998) while the late 1970s fostered cynical “madman” images often paired up with physical disabilities. Traditionally it was assumed that an individual’s medical condition was the cause of their exclusion from society, however in the mid-seventies the Social Model of disability

emerged. According to Clark (2003), the Social Model extended the identity of an individual who is disabled as people who:

1. Are Deaf or hard of hearing
2. Have a visual impairment
3. Have difficulty learning
4. Have a physical impairment
5. Have a speech impairment
6. Have restricted growth
7. Are HIV positive or have AIDS
8. Experience mental distress or are survivors of the mental health system.

Safran (1998) writes that disability portrayal in films is limited in number and narrow in scope. There are very few quantitative studies and they have not been updated to include films from 1990s – 2000s. Byrd and colleagues (as cited in Safran, 1998) have done extensive research on the topic. It was delineated that 33 out of 287 feature length films contained disability depictions (11.5%). Mental illness, alcoholism, and drug abuse were the most frequent disabilities portrayed followed by speech and hearing impairments, blindness, physical disabilities and mental retardation (Safran, 1998). This same study was updated to include 1,051 films from 1976 to 1983 (11.4% had disability depictions). Psychiatric disabilities continued to be the largest group of disability roles (43.5%). Sensory disabilities was represented in 13% of the films, drug addiction in 11.7% of the films, and neuromuscular in (9.7%) of the films (Safran, 1998). Bryd and colleagues (as cited in Safran, 1998) addressed character depictions from 1986 to 1988 and found that 67 individuals with disabilities were portrayed in 302 films (17.5%)

(Safran, 1998). Schuchman (1988) identified 82 films that focused on deafness but Hollywood's inaccuracies and stereotypes caused the deaf community to boycott films (Safran, 1988). Furthermore this reduced this number of films to only three films during 1979 to 1986 (Byrd, 1989; Safran 1998). According to Schuchman (1988) since the 1920s more than 150 films and television programs have included individuals who are deaf. The 20th century has had its share of negative depictions and individuals with speech impairments have commonly been ridiculed for comedic effect (Clarke, 2003). More realistic portrayals of disability in film have evolved over time. According to Norden (1994) future films will be made with greater accuracy and sensitivity. Though communication disorders are secondary to many other disabilities (i.e., autism, Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Parkinson's, Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) they have yet to be evaluated quantitatively in films. Types of communication disorders (i.e., stuttering) have been touched on within the realm of disability portrayal in film and discussed as the focus of current college coursework.

Portrayal of Communication Disorders in Films

A limited amount of research was found pertaining to communication disorder portrayal in films. Communication disorders presented in films have been a powerful vehicle for propagating stereotypes, advancing facts, and dispelling myths about individuals with communication disorders (Tanner, 2001).

Accurate Portrayals of Communication Disorders in Film

According to Tanner, factual portrayals of individuals with idioglossia and autism have garnered Academy Awards. Factual portrayals were found in the film *Nell*. Jodi Foster portrays a character with idioglossia who as a child was raised by a speech-

impaired mother who had a stroke and was aphasic. They lived in the backwoods of North Carolina and due to isolation Nell is the only individual who understands her own language. Another film, *Rainman* gives audiences a glimpse into the real world of an autistic savant. Dustin Hoffman portrayed the character of Raymond “Rainman” Babbit. Audiences encounter Raymond’s amazing abilities, including his ability to “count cards.” Therefore, some films have the ability to parallel aspects of the real life of individuals with communication disorders.

Inaccurate Portrayals of Communication Disorders in Film

Inaccurate portrayals of communication disorders in films are also evident. Stuttering has rarely been shown in a positive manner (*A Fish Called Wanda*, 1986; *My Cousin Vinny*, 1992; *The Water Boy*, 1998; *The Sixth Sense*, 1999) (Tanner 2001; Johnson, 2008). People within the motion picture industry have also propagated inaccurate myths about deafness (e.g., *Children of a Lesser God*, 1986), aphasia (e.g., *Legends of the Fall*, 1994), communication disorders (e.g., *Forest Gump*, 1994), and other disorders (Tanner, 2001).

Research Depicting Communication Disorders in Film

Table 1 indicates research found pertaining to communication disorders in films. Table 1 depicts (a) the author; (b) the source description; (c) the number of films targeted; (d) the year range of the films used; and (e) the types of disorders portrayed in the films. Six authors investigated (Baxendale, 2004; Johnson, 2008; McLeod, 2003; Tanner, 2003; Whittington-Walsh, 2002) communication disorders to some degree in peer-reviewed journals and three authors (Hooper, 2006; Tanner, 2008; Timmons, 2003) used films portraying communication disorders within the classroom. Three authors,

Whittington-Walsh (2002), Baxendale (2004), and Johnson (2008) focused their research on a type of disability or communication disorders. Whittington-Wash (2002) focused on the depiction of individuals with disabilities in the film *Freaks* (1932) with images from various mainstream films (e.g., *The Hunchback of Nortre Dame*, 939; *Charly*, 1966; *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1969; *Rain Man*, 1988; *My Left Foot*, 1989; and *Sling Blade*, 1996). The films used primarily focus on autism and savants. Baxendale (2004) examined the use of films to inform and reflect public opinion by promoting myths about amnesic conditions. Approximately 62 films were discussed throughout the article ranging from 1915-2004. Disorders portrayed in the films were traumatic brain injury, short term and working memory deficits, and amnesia. Johnson (2008) depicted the portrayal of stuttering in film, television and comic books. Eleven films were discussed as part of Johnson's article. Stuttering was portrayed as nervousness, humorous, weak, unheroic, or villainous (Johnson, 2008). McLeod (2003) compiled an annotated bibliography of books and movies about individuals with communication impairments. Twenty-three films (ranging from 1961-2002) depicted stuttering, deafness, reacquisition of a forgotten mother tongue, intellectual disability, Alzheimer's disease, articulation disorders, Cerebral Palsy, language disorders, learning colloquialisms.

Table 1. Literature Pertaining to Communication Disorders in Film

Author(s)	Source Description	Number of Films*	Film Year Range	Types of Disorders
Whittington-Walsh, F (2002)	Examines the depiction of individuals with disabilities in the film <i>Freaks</i> (1932) with a focus on Autism and savants.	8	1939-1997	autism, language disorders, mental retardation, cerebral palsy
McLeod, S (2003)	Annotated bibliography of books and movies about individuals with communication impairments	23	1961-2002	stuttering, deafness, reacquisition of a forgotten mother tongue, intellectual disability, alzheimer's disease, articulation disorders, cerebral palsy, language disorders,

				learning colloquialisms
Baxendale, S (2004)	Examines the use of films to inform and reflect public opinion by promoting myths about amnesic conditions.	~62	1915-2004	traumatic brain injury, short term and working memory deficits, amnesia
Tanner, D (2003)	Illustrates the use of films by one professor as means for introducing communication disorders	13	1972-2000	stuttering, developmental disability, language disorder, mental retardation, deafness
Timmons, J (2003)	Teaching Film, Television and Media course: student module films depicting disabilities (Duke University)	25	1948-2002	mental illness, mental retardation, deafness, throat cancer, developmental disability, alzheimer's disease, autism, cerebral palsy, muteness, ALS, tourette syndrome
Hooper, C. (2006)	Communication Disabilities and Film Course List (North Carolina at Greenbro)	9	1986-2001	language disorders, autism, stuttering, mental retardation, developmental delay, voice disorders, hearing loss
Tanner, D. (2008)	Communication Disorders in Literature and Media Film Course List (Northern Arizona University)	18	1962-2001	deafness, muteness, lisp, stuttering, autism, tourette syndrome, language disorders, developmental delay, articulation disorders, voice disorder
Johnson, J. (2008)	Depicts the portrayal of stuttering in film, television and comic books.	1941-1998	11	Stuttering

**number of films included as films with individuals with a communication impairment or disorder or films that promoted awareness of communication, language and/or communication impairment*

Using Films depicting Communication Disorders in the Classroom

According to Amelio (1993), many educators have realized the tremendous influence that film exerts on students (e.g., intellectual, social, aesthetic, personal). College instructors have used motion pictures as an educational tool to represent information about a wide range of disabilities (Safran, 2000). Two communication sciences and disorders courses were identified that taught students about communication disorder portrayal in films (i.e., *Communication disabilities in Film* at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro and *Communication Disorders in Media and Literature* at Ohio University). In order for films to be effective within the scope of higher education films need to be used in a structured context (Safran, 2000).

Selecting Appropriate Films for Educational Purposes

Amelio details that teachers selected films for general educational use based on: (a) whether the films related to the students; (b) are the films fine examples of what is trying to be taught; (c) are they classic and contemporary examples of recognized excellence; and (d) are the films liked enough by viewers to communicate with them. Safran (2000) details several factors that need to be considered when selecting movies portraying disabilities for educational purposes. Factors include:

- 1. Always preview the film first to make sure content is appropriate for the audience, particularly in its level of sex and violence (i.e., the movies rating).*
- 2. Feature movies that cast people with real disabilities or that ascertain that the performer had extensive part preparation.*
- 3. Choose films that present people with disabilities as full participants in their communities and schools.*
- 4. Be sure that the full complexity of an individual's personality is developed.*
- 5. Instructors need to verify the accuracy of the portrayed disability.*
- 6. Show films where disability issues, such as inclusion, accessibility, independent living, are embedded into the plot.*
- 7. Avoid movies that sensationalize or feature extensive stereotypical depictions.*

Analyzing communication disorders in film can increase understanding of a particular disorder or disability. Perspectives from psychology, sociology, education, and communication can be applied to analyze the extent and determine the manner in which media has impacted society's perceptions and attitudes towards disability portrayal in film (Safran, 2000). Social Learning Theory examines the relationship between learning

through observation (Ormond, 1999). According to Ormond, individuals can learn through observing the behavior of others and the outcomes of those behaviors. Bandura (1977) suggests that necessary conditions for effective learning include: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation (Bandura, 1977 as cited in Learning Theories Knowledgebase).

Educational implications of the social learning theory are (a) that students learn by observing other people and (b) students can see consequences. Therefore if students learn through observation, films can be observed as a method of teaching students about a variety of communication disorders. Films can offer a new medium to teach through observation. Observation of films does not imply that a student will “copy” or “model” negative portrayals or attitudes towards individuals with communication disorders. Rather they will learn accurate/inaccurate depiction of the disorder to gain a greater understanding of characteristics related to the disorder (personal communication Stephen Safran).

Films can help students develop awareness of specific disability imagery and gain greater knowledge of characteristics and issues associated with the disability as well (Safran, 2000). The course *Communication Disabilities and Film* at the University of North Carolina at Greenboro is offered in an effort to learn the manner in which films promote positive and negative images of individuals with communication disorders and how the films influence public opinion. The course consists of reaction papers after viewing each film, active participation in class discussions and group projects. Course objectives include experiencing the world of individuals who stutter, have strokes, trouble learning to use language, and those who are deaf. Students participating in this

course also learn to appreciate the impact of communication disorders on the quality of life and develop a skill for comparing images and ideas presented in films to the reality of those experienced by individuals with communication disorders. *Communication Disorders in Media and Literature* is offered at the University of Ohio. The purpose of the college course was to explore communication disorders in literature and media. The course explores the perception of individuals who have communication disorders in media and literature - including an extensive list of films. Each communication disorder is discussed from a clinical and scientific perspective and information is provided about the etiology, diagnosis and treatment.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Methodology

Methodology for choosing films included referencing several authors and professors for their own perspective on film selection. Electronic mail communication was exchanged with Dr. Dennis Tanner, who taught the course, *Communication Disorders in Media and Literature* at the University of Ohio; Dr. Kelly Hall, who taught the course *Communication Disabilities in Film*; and Dr. Stephen P. Safran, former instructor for *Disability Portrayal in Media* at Ohio University. The above instructors indicated that film choices were based on word of mouth, student interest, and type of disorder. The films used in this study were selected in the same manner.

Film Selection

Films chosen for this study met four criteria:

1. Depicted a character (in a leading or supporting role) that had a communication disorder or a disability that resulted in a communication disorder.
2. Included only feature length motion pictures ranging from 1974 to 2009, and did not include animated feature length films.
3. Characters portraying the communication disorder

4. or disability were either protagonists or secondary characters whose disorder is evident to the viewer and significant to the story line.
5. Researcher preference.

Thirty films were selected for this study. The films were viewed to determine: (a) characters with communication disorders and (b) type of communication disorder. The films were then divided into seven categories according to the type of communication disorder and then analyzed:

1. Language Disorders
2. Fluency Disorders
3. Articulation Disorders
4. Voice Disorders
5. Motor Speech Disorders
6. Communication Disorders Resulting from TBI
7. Deafness

Evaluation of Films

Two methods of film evaluation were utilized in this study/investigation: (a) *Method 1*: Thirty films were evaluated according to the 7 communication disorder categories and (b) *Method 2*: Evaluation of communication disorder/disability according to Safran (2000) for 7 of the 30 films (one from each of the 7 communication disorder categories).

Method 1. The thirty films used in this study were viewed and the investigator took notes on: (a) film information (year, title, rating, genre, director); (b) movie

character depicting the disorder/disability; (c) actor portraying the character; and (d) type of communication disorder/disability portrayed by character.

The author viewed and gathered the above information on each film. The *Internet Movie Database* (ibdm.com) was used to gather general film information such as the following: release year, title, rating, genre, director, character, and actor. The *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb) consists of collection of movie information. IMDb catalogs pertinent information regarding movies on a daily basis. The author gathered communication disorder/disability characteristics via observation. Each film was then placed into one of seven communication disorder categories according to communication disorder portrayed in the film.

Method 2. Seven films were selected from the 30 films to represent one of each of the seven communication disorder categories. These films were evaluated according to Safran's (2000) format for assessing disability portrayal in specific terms. Safran's method for assessing disability portrayal was modified by the investigator to evaluate the following:

1. Common characteristics of the disability/communication disorder
2. Specific issues related to the disability/communication disorder
3. Whether the performer actually has a disability or if the actor needed special preparation and/or expert consultation
4. Whether disability characteristics and issues are represented
5. If the disability characteristics and issues are accurately portrayed
6. The overall evaluation of the films

For the purpose of this study Safran's method was modified to focus on communication disorders. The following areas were added to his model: (a) synopsis of film (b) whether or not the communication disorder secondary to another primary diagnosis; and, (c) common characteristics of the disability/communication disorder. Table 2 depicts the items used for gathering information about each film.

Table 2. *Method 2: Safran's Modified Format Used to Evaluate Accuracy of Communication Disorder* (adapted from Safran, 2000)

Film information (Title and Rating):
Synopsis:
Disability/Communication Disorder:
1.) <i>Is the communication disorder secondary to another diagnosis?</i>
2.) <i>Common characteristics of the disability/ communication disorder</i>
3.) <i>Specific issues related to the disability/communication disorder</i>
4.) <i>Does the Performer have a disability (if not, what preparation or expert consultation was provided?)</i>
5.) <i>Disability characteristics and issues are represented in the film (Accurate/Inaccurate portrayals)</i>
6.) <i>Overall evaluation of this film</i>

The seven films chosen were from the late 20th and 21st century (ranged from 1989-2000). Films included in this part of the investigation:

1. *Adam* (2009)- language disorder
2. *Inkheart* (2008)- stuttering
3. *Baby Mama* (2009)- articulation
4. *The Doctor* (1991)- voice disorder
5. *My Left Foot* (1987)- motor speech disorder
6. *Memento* (2000)- cognitive communicative disorder resulting from traumatic brain injury
7. *Whip It* (2009)- deafness

Each film was reviewed thoroughly and extensive notes were taken according to Table 4. Each item in Table 4 was answered via observation of chosen films by the current author, web—based/internet searches, and use of scholarly journals and textbooks.

Findings

Thirty films were included in this study. The 30 films portrayed a total of 33 individuals with communication disorders. Communication disorders ranged from language disorders, articulation disorders, phonological disorders, stuttering, voice disorders, and deafness. Etiologies associated with the variety of communication disorders portrayed in the selected films included: (a) autism, (b) Asperger's Syndrome, (c) cerebral palsy, (d) laryngeal cancer, (e) traumatic brain injury (TBI), (f) locked-in syndrome, and (g) Tourette Syndrome. Appendix A indicates the complete film list, rating, genre, director, character, actor, and communication disorder . Communication disorders portrayed in films were found to be with one of seven categories:

1. Language Disorders
2. Fluency Disorders
3. Articulation Disorders
4. Voice Disorders
5. Motor Speech Disorders
6. Communication Disorders Resulting from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
7. Deafness/Hearing Impairments

Table 3 depicts the number of movie characters found to be within seven categories.

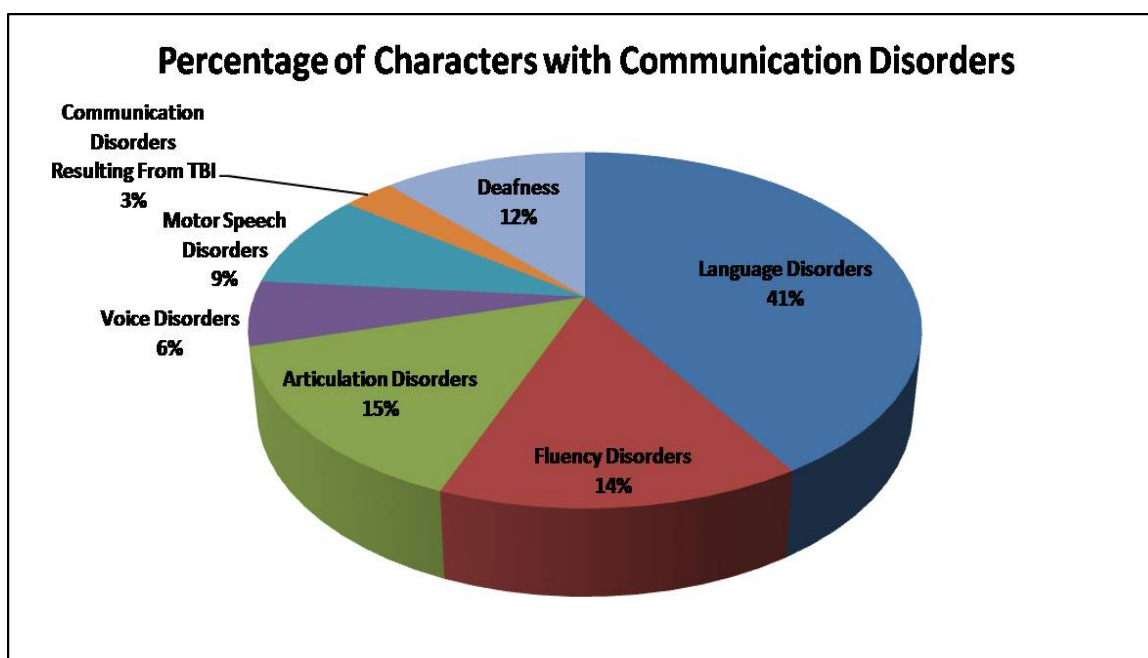
Results indicated that 14 movie characters depicted some type of language disorder, five characters portrayed fluency disorders, five characters portrayed articulation disorders, four characters portrayed deafness, three characters portrayed motor speech disorders, two characters portrayed voice disorders, and one character portrayed communication disorders secondary to TBI.

Table 3. Character Portrayal of Communication Disorder

Communication Disorder Category	Number of Characters
Language Disorders	14
Fluency Disorders	5
Articulation Disorders	5
Deafness	4
Motor Speech Disorders	3
Voice Disorders	2
Disorders Resulting from TBI	1

Figure 1 depicted the percentage of characters with communication disorders in each of the seven categories. It was found that 41% of characters within the films presented with language disorders, 15% presented with articulation disorders, 14% with fluency disorders, 12% presented with deafness, 9% presented with motor speech disorders, 6% exhibited voice disorders, and 3% presented with communication disorders secondary to TBI.

Figure 1. Percentage of Characters with Communication Disorders



Seven films, one from each category, were selected by the current author and evaluated according to Safran's (2000) format for assessing disability portrayal in specific terms. Safran's format was modified to include questions pertaining to communication disorders. Each film is evaluated below:

Film #1. *Adam* (2009) PG-13, Asperger's syndrome

Synopsis. *Beth* (Rose Byrne) moves into a nearby apartment, *Adam* (Hugh Dancy), who suffers from Asperger's syndrome, breaks through his limited social abilities and flirts with the young woman in this moving romance. *Beth* responds to Adam's unusual courtship. As they overcome the obstacles to intimacy, they learn how to face life's other challenges. (Adam, n.d.)

Communication disorder secondary to another diagnosis. Adam's communication disorder is related to Asperger's syndrome. Therefore, he has expressive language disorder and pragmatic disorder.

Common characteristics of the disability/communication disorder. Asperger's syndrome is a neurobiological disorder that is characterized by impaired social interaction and limited repetitive patterns of behavior (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007).

Specific issues related to the disability/communication disorder. An individual diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome has difficulty making friends, and commonly engages in one-sided conversations without appropriate conversational turn-taking or topic maintenance skills (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007). Other characteristics include lack of eye contact, few facial expressions, and lack of empathy towards others feelings (Pierangelo & Giuliani). They also have difficulty understanding humor, show an intense obsession with one or two specific narrow subjects, may memorize information and facts easily, and perform repetitive movements among other behavioral issues (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007).

Actor Information: disability, acting preparation and/or expert consultation.

Hugh Dancy does not have a disability. In an interview with *Autism Speaks* Dancy stated that prior to filming he was unaware of characteristics associated with Asperger's. His extensive research of the topic took months. His research began on the Internet, then he explored books, and finally he spoke personally with individuals who have Asperger's to learn more about their individual stories (Viera, 2009). Although the task was daunting Dancy said "For me, the beauty of the film is that it insists on Adam as an individual, who's just one person, rather than being all Asperger's diagnoses..." (Viera). Each individual he met was "close to Adam in different ways" and by observing and interacting with these individuals he was able to expand the character of Adam as a whole (Autism Speaks, 2009).

Disability characteristics and issues are represented in the film (Accurate/Inaccurate portrayals). *Adam*(2009) portrays different aspects of Asperger's syndrome and demonstrates the effect of Asperger's on everyday life. The film places a large emphasis on order and routine. Adam's refrigerator is stocked with identical macaroni and cheese containers. The same suit ensembles are in his closet and his routine is identical every day. He doesn't realize he needs to do laundry until all of his suits are dirty and there aren't any more clean clothes. Adam has limited eye contact and few facial expressions. After his father's death, his routine slowly changes. He lacks empathy and doesn't understand humor when he begins his relationship with Beth. During one scene, Beth takes Adam to a friend's house and her friend begins to talk about how cute a baby is, asking Adam, "Would you want to see the videos?" she asks Adam (Meyer, 2000). Adam simply replies, "No, thank you" (Meyer, 2000). This typical impaired

social interaction is seen throughout the film. Adam also has difficulty making friends. Throughout the film he only has one friend (Harlan) and he has difficulty acclimating to his relationship. Adam's attention to one specific subject (e.g., astronomy, science) eventually gets him fired from his job because he is unable to understand and work at the expected pace. Asperger's is often characterized by the same intense obsession in one or two specific areas (Giuliani, 2000 as cited in Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007). In the current author's opinion, *Adam* portrays aspects of Asperger's accurately without creating a character that is stereotyped by the above mentioned behaviors. The film accurately shows interpersonal relationships and highlights specific characteristics associated with a language disorder related to Asperger's syndrome.

Overall evaluation of this film. Hugh Dancy's portrayal of communication characteristics associated with Asperger's is generally accurate. Adam is a high functioning individual who in the end, despite various setbacks, is able to hold a job and actively participate successfully as a member of society. This film is a good introduction to the abilities, communication skills, and challenges associated with individuals who have Asperger's. However, Asperger's is associated with higher intelligence and communication skills than individuals with classic or more severe forms of autism (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006 as cited in Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007). Therefore this film does not represent the most common conditions associated with developmental disorders known as autism spectrum disorders (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007).

Film #2. *Inkheart*, 2008, PG, Stuttering

Synopsis. *Mo "Silvertongue" Folchart (Brendan Fraser) has the ability to bring characters to life by reading their stories out loud. But when the wicked Capricorn (Andy Serkis) comes after Mo, Meggie, Mo's daughter, must rescue him. This film is based on the best-selling children's novel by Cornelia Funke. ("Inkheart", n.d.)*

Communication disorder secondary to another diagnosis. The communication disorder is not secondary to another diagnosis. Darius' character portrays an individual who stutters.

Common characteristics of the disability/communication disorder. Stuttering is a fluency disorder that is associated with the disruption in the normal flow of speech by frequent repetitions or prolongation of speech sounds, words, syllables, or the individual's inability to start a word (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007). Secondary behaviors include tremors of the lips or jaw, rapid eye blinks, or other struggle behaviors of the face/upper body that a person may use when speaking (Anderson & Shames, 2006 as cited in Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007).

Specific issues related to the disability/communication disorder. Stuttering is defined by Van Riper (Van Ripper 1973, 1992 as cited in Tanner, 2003) as the speaker's reaction to a word improperly patterned in time. Stuttering often becomes worse during stressful situations. Symptoms include pausing between words or within words, interjections, prolongations, repetitions, circumlocution, substituting simple words for those that are difficult to express, using incomplete phrases, showing obvious tension and/or discomfort while talking and making parenthetical remarks (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007). Individuals who stutter may experience negative emotional reactions to

their disfluent speech and may engage in avoidance and escape behaviors (Tanner, Belliveau, & Seibert, 1995).

Actor Information: disability, acting preparation and/or expert consultation.

John Tomson is a comedian and actor whose roles have been limited to television prior to the motion picture *Inkheart*. He does not have an observable disability, and information on acting preparation or expert consultation was not found.

Disability characteristics and issues are represented in the film (Accurate/Inaccurate portrayals). *Inkheart* (2008) portrays Darius as a silvertongue who is a perpetual stutterer. Darius' speech impediment affects his power as a "silvertongue." Silvertongues have the ability to bring literary characters to life. While Mo's speech is eloquent and fluent, Darius' speech is characterized by repetitions, prolongations and blocks, all which are characteristics of stuttering. Capricorn, the villain, forces Darius to become his reader because he is unable to find Mo. When Darius reads, the characters come out of the book flawed and deformed (with disabilities of their own). For example, some of the characters have words tattooed across their eyes, are missing voice boxes or have physical disabilities. According to Capricorn, their faces are covered with words because they're only "half way out of the book" (Softly, 2008). Capricorn and his henchmen constantly make fun of Darius and when they find Mo. They are ecstatic because now they have "someone who can really read" (Softly, 2008). When Mo reads the characters appear intact. Darius' stuttering behaviors become more severe when he is asked to read in public, which is also a common characteristic of individuals who stutter.

Overall evaluation of this film. Stuttering is not the central theme of *Inkheart*, but the movie offers a different perspective of stuttering to the viewer. The film emphasizes the power of the written word when it is read orally. Viewers are able to visualize effects of stuttering on different characters in the movie. The characters that are read out of the book by Darius represent the negative aspects of stuttering, and their physical flaws are directly related to Darius' inability to speak fluently. Unlike other films (e.g., *My Cousin Vinny*) whose portrayal of stuttering is more realistic and used for comedic effect, *Inkheart's* overall depiction of stuttering is viewed as negative. Darius is blamed by other characters for their disfigurement and additional "disabilities," and is mocked because he stutters. The individual who stutters is ridiculed and is not accepted by the other characters.

Film #3. *Baby Mama*, 2008, articulation disorder

Synopsis. *Kate Holbrook (Tina Fey), a career woman who, upon learning she's infertile, hires Angie (Amy Poehler) to be her live-in surrogate. As the pair struggles to adjust to their unconventional partnership, Kate and Angie begin to discover that family can be found in the unlikeliest of places ("Baby Mama", n.d.)*

Communication disorder secondary to another diagnosis. The communication disorder is not secondary to another diagnosis. The birthing teacher portrays an individual with an articulation disorder.

Common characteristics of the disability/communication disorder. Articulation disorders are difficulties forming and stringing sounds together (Friend, 2005 as cited in Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007). These disorders are characterized by substituting one sound for another (e.g., *wabbit/rabbit*), omitting a sound (e.g., *iceam/icecream*),

distorting a sound (e.g., *ship/sip*) or adding a sound (e.g., *elepheetant/elephant*) (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007).

Specific issues related to the disability/communication disorder. Articulation disorders range from mild impairments to the inability to produce speech that is intelligible (Tanner, 2003). Articulation disorders can result from the following: “deafness or hearing loss, structural defects of the articulators, motor speech disorders, delayed development, auditory perceptual and sensorimotor deficiencies and emotional distress” (Tanner, 2003). Three out of five of all speech and language disorders are related to articulation problems, making them the most frequently occurring of all speech disorders (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007; b. ASHA, 2005).

Actor Information: disability, acting preparation and/or expert consultation. Siobhan Fallon portrays the birthing teacher in the film *Baby Mama* (2008). She does not have an observable communication disability and information on acting preparation or expert consultation to portray an articulation disorder was not found.

Disability characteristics and issues are represented in the film (Accurate/Inaccurate portrayals). The birthing teacher in *Baby Mama* (2008) accurately portrays an individual with an articulation disorder. She substitutes /r/ with /w/ and /l/ in the initial and final position of words (e.g., *cwowning/crowning*, *dwugs/drugs*). Her articulation disorder is apparently portrayed in efforts to provide comic relief to the audience.

Overall evaluation of this film. *Baby Mama* follows the similar pattern of other films (e.g., *The Princess Bride*), by utilizing articulation disorders for comedic effect. Both films portray substitution of /r/ for /w/ and /l/. Although speech impairments have commonly been ridiculed for comedic effect (Clarke, 2003), the birthing teacher in *Baby*

Mama has a generally positive take on individuals with articulation disorders. The birthing teacher is not noticeably hindered by her articulation disorder. She is a valued member of society. The individuals who attend the birthing class do not make fun of or ridicule the birthing teacher. Rather, they respect her questions and answer them with enthusiasm. They return to the class because they receive good services and instruction from the birthing teacher regardless of her articulation disorder.

Film #4. *The Doctor*, 1999, voice disorder

Synopsis. Surgeon Jack MacKee (William Hurt) regards his patients as specimens rather than people. When MacKee learns that he has cancer he begins to aspire to a higher moral plateau of love and compassion with patients. He's helped in his mission via a special bond he forges with a fellow cancer victim (Elizabeth Perkins).

("The Doctor", n.d.)

Communication disorder secondary to another diagnosis. Dr. Jack MacKee's communication disorder is secondary to laryngeal cancer. The character is faced with a voice disorder after an operation to remove the laryngeal cancer.

Common characteristics of the disability/communication disorder. Laryngeal cancer (throat cancer) occurs when cancerous (malignant) cells form on the tissues of the larynx and results in vocal problems (ASHA, 2010). The larynx contains vocal folds that vibrate and produce sound when air passes through them (ASHA, 2010). Symptoms of laryngeal cancer includes any of the following: a lump in the throat, bad cough or chest infection, hoarseness or change in ones voice, difficulty swallowing, shortness of breath, bad breath (halitosis), weight loss and prolonged earache (ASHA, 2010).

Specific issues related to the disability/communication disorder. Different approaches may be used in the treatment of throat cancer, including radiation therapy, chemotherapy, and/or partial or total removal of the larynx (laryngectomy) (ASHA). Due to changes in the laryngeal tissue from radiation or chemotherapy, or removal of nearby neck muscles or laryngeal structures, it may be difficult or impossible to produce voice (ASHA, 2010). Additionally, patients who undergo radiation treatments may experience a sore throat, dry mouth, mouth sores, difficulty swallowing, and decreased taste (ASHA, 2010). Patients who receive chemotherapy may experience bleeding or bruising, nausea or vomiting, increased chance of infection, shortness of breath or fatigue (ASHA, 2010).

Actor Information: disability, acting preparation and/or expert consultation.

William Hurt does not have an observable communication disability. The character was based on Ed Rosenbaum's book, *A Taste of My Own Medicine*. Rosenbaum was diagnosed with laryngeal cancer at the age of 70 years. The book provided the back drop for the plot and the basis for a real life depiction of a doctor who is diagnosed with laryngeal cancer.

Disability characteristics and issues are represented in the film (Accurate/Inaccurate portrayals. *The Doctor* (1999) accurately depicts an individual with a voice disorder as a result of laryngeal cancer. Dr. Jack McKee demonstrates many of the common symptoms associated with laryngeal cancer. His voice disorder begins as a "tickle" in his throat. He habitually clears his throat, his voice is fatigued, and he begins to cough up blood which are all symptoms of a voice disorder. He is eventually diagnosed with laryngeal cancer. He consults an ENT (an ear, nose and throat doctor).

After examining his throat endoscopically, the ENT finds a growth—a laryngeal tumor—that needs to be biopsied. The viewer catches a glimpse of Jack’s vocal folds in the background. The subsequent biopsy indicates that the tumor is malignant. Jack wants it removed but receives radiation therapy instead (Butts, 2006). Towards the end of the film, Jack has the tumor removed. Following the removal, he is unable to vocalize. He doesn’t know if his voice will return and has to use a whistle, gestures, and a dry erase board to communicate. His inability to communicate his feelings strains the relationship between his wife and son. He becomes frustrated that his family is treating him differently. When he finally utters “I love you,” to his wife he realizes that the surgery didn’t leave him without the ability to communicate verbally.

Overall evaluation of this film. *The Doctor* demonstrates an overall accurate depiction of an individual with a voice disorder. The film has the capacity to inform students about patient/health provider relationships, empathy towards patients, voice disorder characteristics, patient confidentiality and laryngeal cancer treatments. It also depicts the importance of communication, family support, and professional health care doctor/patient relationships.

Film #5. *My Left Foot*, 1987, Cerebral Palsy

Synopsis. *Daniel Day-Lewis portrayed Irish writer Christy Brown, who was born with cerebral palsy and misdiagnosed as mentally disabled for the first 10 years of his life. The story unfolds in a series of flashbacks with Hugh O’Conor starring as the young Christy, who eventually learned to write using the only body part he could control: his left foot. Daniel Day-Lewis won an Oscar for his portrayal of Christy Brown. (“My Left Foot”, n.d.)*

Communication disorder secondary to another diagnosis. Christy Brown's communication disorder is secondary to cerebral palsy. Christy has dysarthria, a motor speech disorder, in addition to other communication disorders related to cerebral palsy.

Communication disorder secondary to another diagnosis. Christy Brown's communication disorder is secondary to cerebral palsy. Christy has dysarthria, a motor speech disorder, in addition to other communication disorders related to cerebral palsy.

Common characteristics of the disability/communication disorder. Cerebral palsy (CP) is a term used to describe a group of chronic disorders caused by damage to motor areas in the brain, which impair control of movement (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007). Damage to the motor control system can result in discoordination, abnormal muscle tone, and other movement disorders (Tanner, 2003). Characteristics include speech and articulation problems and a wide range of gross and fine motor difficulties (Safran, 2000). CP often results in ataxic dysarthria characterized by irregular and jerky speech (Tanner, 2003).

Specific issues related to the disability/communication disorder. Specific issues related to CP include physical accessibility to one's environment, communication disorders, educational inclusion, employment opportunities and family access of community supports (Safran, 2000). Individuals with CP may be wheelchair-bound. CP is sometimes related to mental retardation, but individuals with CP often have average to above-average intellectual skills. CP can also involve interpersonal and social skill problems (Safran, 2000).

Actor Information: disability, acting preparation and/or expert consultation.

According to Safran, Daniel Day-Lewis "spent several weeks in a rehabilitation center

for individuals with cerebral palsy (CP) and other physical disabilities, mastering the physical movements of persons with severe CP, gaining insight into their psychological and life challenges” (Safran, 2000, p.4). While filming, Lewis remained in character as Christy Brown; on and off screen, he never left his wheelchair and was even spoon-fed by the crew (Sullivan, 2008).

Disability characteristics and issues are represented in the film (Accurate/ Inaccurate portrayals). In the current author’s opinion, the film accurately depicts the physical disability, highlights the impact of CP on the family, and presents typical issues related to interpersonal relationships, sexuality and accessibility (Safran, 2000). Christy depicts the struggle to communicate effectively. It takes years for his parents realize that he can understand them and that he knows how to spell or communicate; prior to that his family and community thought that he was mentally retarded. Family members are eventually very accepting of Christy’s condition. For example, Christy is regularly included when he plays with his brothers, goes to church and during special events. Christy struggles to communicate verbally, but when he begins to receive speech therapy his life completely changes, and he is able to communicate his wants and needs more effectively. The use of speech therapy is also depicted accurately largely in part because *My Left Foot* is a biographical drama based on the Irish writer Christy Brown. Large strides were taken to accurately portray Christy’s life and struggles. When Christy gets upset during a dinner—he screams, pushes the table and his behavior become self injurious—he states “I’m glad you taught me how to speak so that I could say that” (Guber & Levinson, 1988). The ability to communicate gave him a freedom he did not

have before he was verbal. This authentic portrayal depicts Christy as a creative individual who wants a life of normalcy just like everyone else.

Overall evaluation of this film. Lewis's accurate portrayal of the physical characteristics of severe cerebral palsy makes *My Left Foot* a good film to introduce the abilities and challenges related to CP. It's interesting to see Christy's communication skills evolve throughout the film. Safran states that the only concern is that "audiences may expect all persons with CP to be as gifted and creative as Christy Brown, but this is what draws the audience into the film's story" (Safran, 2000, p 47).

Film #6. Memento, (2000) Retrograde Amnesia

Synopsis. Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), suffers short-term memory loss after a head injury and embarks on a grim quest to find the lowlife who murdered his wife. Shelby snaps Polaroids of people and places to carry out his plan. He jots down contextual notes on the backs of photos to aid in his search and jog his memory. He even tattoos his own body in a desperate bid to remember. ("Memento", n.d.)

Communication disorder secondary to another diagnosis. Leonard's communication disorder resulted from a traumatic brain injury he received when someone invaded his home and killed his wife. As a result, throughout the film, he exhibits characteristics of anterograde amnesia.

Common characteristics of the disability/communication disorder. According to Tanner (2003), anterograde amnesia is failure to recall events that have happened since the brain injury. This type of selective amnesia can be caused by damage to selected areas of the brain (Tanner). Anterograde amnesia affects all areas of memory including: attention, storage and recall.

Specific issues related to the disability/communication disorder. Individuals with anterograde amnesia have short term memory loss. This presents a problem for relationships, socializing, attention, fact retrieval and basic everyday events. Short term memory loss, or working memory, prevents the ability to make new memories and causes a great deal of frustration.

Actor Information: disability, acting preparation and/or expert consultation.

Guy Pearce stated that whenever he's about to start a film he usually goes to a book store and checks out books on the subject—out of interest for that particular subject (Stevenson, n.d.). *Memento* (2000) is inspired partly by the neuropsychological studies of the patient HM, who developed severe anterograde memory impairment after neurosurgery to control his epileptic seizures (Baxendale, 2004).

Disability characteristics and issues are represented in the film (Accurate/Inaccurate portrayals). *Memento* (2000) is unlike many films in this genre because “the character retains his identity, has little retrograde amnesia, and shows several of the severe everyday memory difficulties associated with the disorder” (Baxendale, 2004, p. 1483). Leonard is aware of his condition. “I have this condition, it's my memory...I have no short term memory,” he says to everyone he encounters (Nolan, 2000). Although he has short term memory loss he believes that “you need a system if you're gonna make it work” (Nolan, 2000). Throughout the film he struggles to piece the puzzle he created for himself. Leonard states that the only reason to live is for revenge. Leonard's story is told in a series of flashbacks; the viewer must pay attention to understand all the pieces of the “puzzle”. Leonard takes Polaroid photographs of everyone he encounters, places, and important objects because he doesn't remember anything short term. Due to his

condition, he doesn't have any real relationships. He is taken advantage of by every main character in the movie. Leonard only trusts his own handwriting and often tattoos different clues to his wife's murder in an effort to condition himself through habit. While the note system seems to work for Sammy, it is not an effective course of treatment. He doesn't receive or seek therapy for his condition.

Overall evaluation of this film. Memento (2000) presents a unique case of anterograde amnesia that gives the audience a visual representation of how Leonard's mind works through flashbacks. Happenings from the past are shown in black and white, and present-time happenings are shown in color. Overall, the film depicts a rather grim look at the life of a broken individual who can't get his life back. Leonard states, "How am I suppose to heal if I can't feel time?" (Nolan, 2000). Leonard's character could be used to determine various treatment plans that can help individuals with similar forms of memory loss live a better quality of life.

Film #7. Whip It, 2009, Deafness

Synopsis. Teenager Bliss (Ellen Page) escapes her mother's (Marcia Gay Harden) beauty pageant plans for her, small-town and joins an all-girl roller derby team in Austin. She begins living a thrilling double life as Babe Ruthless -- a life that might catch up with her. ("Whip It", n.d.)

Communication disorder secondary to another diagnosis. In the film *Whip It* (2009) the Manson sisters (Kristen Adolphi and Rachel Piplica) are deaf. Their communication disorder is directly related to her deafness.

Common characteristics of the disability/communication disorder. Deafness is partial or total lack of hearing and may be present at birth (congenital) or may be acquired at any age (Columbia Encyclopedia, 2008). Hearing loss is divided into three general categories: conductive, sensorineural and central (Tanner, 2003). Conductive hearing loss is due to damage or impairment to the external or middle ear; sensorineural hearing loss is a result of damage to the cochlea or cranial nerve VIII, and central hearing loss is due to damage to the central auditory nervous system (Tanner, 2003).

Specific issues related to the disability/communication disorder. Many individuals who are deaf communicate largely via sign language. Similar to the spoken language, sign language unites a group of people and develops a culture (Avon, 2006). The deaf culture is unique and distinctive. Individuals who are not familiar with the deaf culture might find it difficult to understand or communicate with individuals who partake actively within this culture.

Actor Information: disability, acting preparation and/or expert consultation.

Kristen Adolphi and Rachel Piplica are not deaf. They are actual roller derby skaters in Los Angeles. In the film *Whip It* (2009) they play deaf twins. They had to study American Sign Language to prepare for their roles (Cuthbert, 2009).

Disability characteristics and issues are represented in the film (Accurate/Inaccurate portrayals) *Whip It* (2009) presents the twin Manson sisters, twins who are deaf as extremely aggressive roller derby skaters who are also deaf. While there are accurate depictions in the film such as using sign language, gestures, facial expressions to communicate, the film propagates common misconceptions about characters who are deaf. According to Tanner (2001), films in which a character is deaf often portray speech

reading as being 100% accurate (e.g., *Children of a Lesser God*, 1986). When the Manson sisters are introduced to Bliss, they are described as very aggressive. Manson sister #1 (Kristen Adolphi) even gives Smashly Simpson a bloody nose. Their coach, Razor, stops her and says, “Hey, that move will get you tossed from the game; there’s no room in this sport for that!” (Barrymore, 2009). In reaction, Manson sister #2 (Rachel Piplica) translates in sign language to her twin, who then explains to Razor in sign language that she’s deaf. As a result, Razor’s voice gets low and he says, “*Oh okay sorry, but I* (he points to his eye), *like* (points to self) *the aggression* (closes fists together towards his chest)” (Barrymore, 2009). Only one hearing character uses sign language once when communicating with the Manson sisters. When their coach relays the plays or the team huddles, the sisters use various gestures but don’t use sign language again throughout the film. Every time another character communicates with them, they simply nod or provide a facial expression as a means of communicating. There is no interpreter present, so it’s insinuated that the sisters can read lips fairly well. Audience members who are not familiar with communication disorders or deafness don’t know that the Manson sisters are deaf until the end of the film. Johnny Rocket, the roller derby announcer, says that the opposing team can yell all they want, “But she can’t hear you...no, seriously, she can’t hear you--she’s deaf” (Barrymore, 2009)

Overall evaluation of this film. *Whip It* (2009) is generally a positive representation of individuals who are deaf actively participating within the “hearing” community. Although the film is a comedy, it never uses the Manson sisters’ communication disorder as a vehicle for comedic relief. They are tough and aggressive skaters who are deaf, but their deafness doesn’t limit their participation. Portions of *Whip*

It can be used to illustrate possible issues that can arise from individuals who are deaf and actively participate within the hearing community.

Summary of Findings: Method 1

Of the 30 films utilized for this study, communication disorders were presented more accurately in films that were biopics (biographical motion pictures). Films that were comedies were more likely to use characters with communication disorders as supporting actors. Communication disorders ranged from receptive/expressive language disorders, articulation disorders, phonological disorders, stuttering, voice disorders, and deafness. Fourteen movie characters depicted some type of language disorder, 5 films portrayed fluency disorders, 5 films portrayed articulation disorders, 4 films portrayed deafness, 3 films portrayed motor speech disorders, 2 films portrayed voice disorders, and 1 film portrayed communication disorders secondary to TBI.

Summary of Findings: Method 2

Seven films were analyzed using Method #2. The films generally depicted an accurate portrayal of communication disorders. These films were evaluated according to Safran's (2000) format for assessing disability portrayal in specific terms (see Table 4). Safran's method for assessing disability portrayal was modified by the investigator to evaluate: Common characteristics of the disability/communication disorder; Specific issues related to the disability/communication disorder; Whether the performer actually has a disability or if the actor needed special preparation and/or expert consultation; Whether disability characteristics and issues are represented; If the disability characteristics and issues are accurately portrayed; The overall evaluation of the films. Safran's method was modified and focused on communication disorders. The following

areas were added to his model: (a) synopsis of film (b) is the communication disorder secondary to another diagnosis and (c) common characteristics of the disability/communication disorder. In this study biopics and dramas were more likely to depict communication disorders accurately. Deconstructing communication disorders in numerous films gives students and professors the opportunity to learn more about communication disorders and society's perception and treatment of them (Tanner, 2003).

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Conclusions

Research has shown that communication disorders and/or disability portrayal in film have followed a series of historical trends. Films can educate and inform society about the nature, course, and symptoms of a variety of communication disorders (Tanner, 2003). Although motion pictures have been depicted stereotypes and myths about communication disorders, there have been accurate representations as well (Tanner, 2003). Communication disorders in the films selected for the current study ranged from receptive/expressive language disorders, articulation disorders, phonological disorders, stuttering, voice disorders, and deafness. Some communication disorders were found to be a result of autism, Asperger's Syndrome, cerebral palsy, laryngeal cancer, traumatic brain injury (TBI), locked-in syndrome, and Tourette Syndrome.

College instructors have used motion pictures as an educational tool to represent information about a wide range of disabilities (Safran, 2000). This study identified communication sciences and disorders courses that taught students about communication disorder portrayal in films (i.e., *Communication disabilities in Film* at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro and *Communication Disorders in Media and Literature* at Ohio University). College courses such as these offer students a better understanding of communication disorders. Deconstructing communication disorders in numerous films

gives students and professors the opportunity to learn more about communication disorders and society's perception and treatment of them (Tanner, 2003). Films should be evaluated with care to generate awareness, understanding and give students the opportunity for academic growth.

Limitations. The author acknowledges the following limitations in the current study:

1. Film selection was biased, in that the author self-selected the base pool of 30 films.
2. The study was limited to a sampling of 30 films; therefore, the study is lacking an inclusive selection of all possible films depicting communication disorders.
3. Evaluation of communication disorders, disabilities, and accuracy of portrayal was conducted by graduate student in speech-language pathology, not an individual who is trained and certified in diagnosis and treatment of communication disorders.

Future Research

This study focused on a limited number of films depicting characters with communication disorders and suggested the accuracy to which each character depicted the communication disorder(s). There have been numerous studies of disability portrayal within a set time span (Byrd & Elliot, 1988). Other studies have included depiction of positive and negative attitudes towards disability portrayal in film (Safran, 1998) and the extent that motion pictures reflect changes in our society (Eichinger et al., 1992; Holder, 1993; Norden, 1994). According to Safran, "Disability portrayal in cinema is multidisciplinary and frequently represents a disability rights perspective" (p. 467). Areas of future research should focus on portrayal of communication disorders in film. There

are several recommendations for future research into portrayals of communication disorders in films. Recommendations to ensure the study of communication disorders include the following:

1. Incorporate quantitative methods when researching communication disorder portrayal in films.
2. Investigate new and upcoming films for communication disorder/disability portrayal in film and updating current studies to include films released in the 21st century.
3. Examine the incidence of negative stereotypes
4. Determine the number of films depicting communication disorders/disabilities over a large time span.
5. Examine accuracy of portrayal by using expert judges, clinicians, and individuals with the specific communication disorder being portrayed.
6. Examine treatment used to assist individuals with communication disorders depicted in films.
7. Examine animated children's films to determine types of communication disorders depicted and the influence on speech development in children.

In the words of Daniel Webster, "If all my possessions were taken from me with one exception, I would choose to keep the power of communication, for by it I would regain the rest" (Webster, n.d.). Film has the power to influence, inspire and impact the world around us. Future research in the area of communication disorders/disability portrayal in film is beneficial to instructors who teach higher education and other professionals within the scope of speech-language pathology.

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

COMPLETE INFORMATION FOR SELECTED FILMS

Year	Title	Rating	Genre	Director
1974	Young Frankenstein	PG	Comedy	Mel Brooks
1980	Star Wars	PG	Action	Irvin Kershner
1986	Children of a Lesser God	R	Drama	Randa Haines
1987	The Princess Bride	PG	Adventure	Rob Reiner
1987	The Princess Bride	PG	Adventure	Rob Reiner
1988	Rain Man	R	Drama	Brian Levinson
1988	A Fish Called Wanda	R	Comedy	Charles Crichton
1989	My Left Foot	R	Biography Drama	Jim Sheridan
1990	Edward Scissorhands	PG-13	Drama Fantasy	Tim Burton
1991	The Doctor	PG-13	Drama	Randa Haines
1992	My Cousin Vinny	R	Comedy	Jonathan Lynn
1993	What's Eating Gilbert Grape	PG-13	Drama	Lasse Hallstrom
1993	Benny and Joone	PG	Comedy Drama	Jeremiah S. Chechik
1994	Nell	PG-13	Drama	Micael Apted
1994	Forest Gump	PG-13	Drama	Robert Zemeckis
1995	Mr. Holland's Opus	PG	Drama	Stephen Herek
1996	The Cable Guy	PG-13	Comedy	Ben Stiller
1998	The Water Boy	PG-13	Comedy	Frank Coraci
2000	Memento	R	Mystery	Christopher Nolan
2001	Josie and the Pussy Cat Dolls	PG-13	Comedy	Harry Elfont/Deborah Kaplan
2001	I am Sam	PG-13	Drama	Jessie Nelson
2004	Thunderbirds	G	Action	Jonathan Frakes
2005	The Skeleton Key	Pg-13	Drama Horror	Iain Softley
2007	The Diving Bell and the Butterfly	PG-13	Biography Drama	Julian Schnabel
2008	Baby Mama	PG-13	Comedy	Michael McCullers
2008	Front of the Class	NR	Biography Drama	Peter Werner
2008	Phoebe in WonderLand	PG-13	Drama	Daniel Barnz
2008	Ink Heart	PG	Adventure	Iain Softley
2008	Ink Heart	PG	Adventure	Iain Softley
2008	The Dark Knight	PG-13	Action	Christopher Nolan
2008	The Incredible Hulk	PG-13	Action	Louis Leterrier
2009	Adam	PG-13	Drama	Max Mayer
2009	Whip It	PG-13	Comedy	Drew Barrymore
2009	Whip It	PG-13	Comedy	Drew Barrymore

Year	Title	Character	Actor	Communication Disorder/Disability Associated with Communication Disorders
1974	Young Frankenstein	The Monster	Peter Boyle	Language Disorder, Voice Disorder, Intellectual Disability
1980	Star Wars	Yoda	Frank Oz	Expressive Language Disorder
1986	Children of a Lesser God	Sara Norman	Marlee Matlin	Deafness
1987	The Princess Bride	Vizzini	Wallace Shawn	Lisp
1987	The Princess Bride	The Impressive Clergyman	Peter Cook	Articulation
1988	Rain Man	Raymond Babbit	Dustin Hoffman	Expressive/Pragmatic Language Disorder; Autism
1988	A Fish Called Wanda	Ken		Stuttering
1989	My Left Foot	Christy Brown	Daniel Day-Lewis	Cebral Palsy, Dysarthria
1990	Edward Scissorhands	Edward	Johnny Depp	Asperger's Syndrome; Expressive/Pragmatic Language Disorder
1991	The Doctor	Dr. Jack MacKee	William Hurt	Voice Disorder
1992	My Cousin Vinny	John Gibbons	Austin Pendleton	Stuttering
1993	What's Eating Gilbert Grape	Arnie Grape	Leonardo DiCaprio	Language Disorder, Autism
1993	Benny and Joone	Juniper 'Joon' Pearl	Mary Stuart Masterson	Language Disorder, Mental illness
1994	Nell	Nell	Jodi Foster	Language Disorder
1994	Forest Gump	Forest Gump	Tom Hanks	Language Disorder, Learning Disability, Intellectual Disability
1995	Mr. Holland's Opus	Cole Holland	Joseph Anderson	Deafness
1996	The Cable Guy	The Cabel Guy	Jim Carrey	Lisp
1998	The Water Boy	Robert "Bobby" Boucher Jr.	Adam Sandler	Stuttering
2000	Memento	Leonard	Guy Pearce	Traumatic Brain Disorder
2001	Josie and the Pussy Cat Dolls	Fiona	Parker Posey	Lisp
2001	I am Sam	Sam Dawson	Sean Penn	Intellectual Disability
2004	Thunderbirds	Brains	Anthony Edwards	Stuttering
2005	The Skeleton Key	Ben Devereaux	John Hurt	Muteness secondary to Cerebral Vascular Accident (CVA)

Year	Title	Character	Actor	Communication Disorder/Disability Associated with Communication Disorders
2007	The Diving Bell and the Butterfly	Jean-Do	Mathieu Amalric	Locked-in Syndrome
2008	Baby Mama	Birthing Teacher	Siobhan Fallon	Articulation Disorder
2008	Front of the Class	Brad Cohen	James Wolk	Tourette Syndrome
2008	Phoebe in Wonderland	Phoebe Lichten	Elle Fanning	Tourette Syndrome
2008	Ink Heart	Darius	John Thomson	Stuttering
2008	Ink Heart	Resa	Siena Guillory	Muteness
2008	The Dark Knight	Bruce Wayne/ Batman	Christian Bale	Voice Disorder as Batman
2008	The Incredible Hulk	Bruce Banner/ Hulk	Edward Norton	Expressive Language Disorder as Hulk
2009	Adam	Adam Raki	Hugh Dancy	Asperger's Syndrome; Expressive/Pragmatic Language Disorder
2009	Whip It	Manson Sister #1	Kristen Adolphi	Deafness
2009	Whip It	Manson Sister #2	Rachel Piplica	Deafness

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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She has worked on numerous research projects and presented at state-wide, national and international conferences. Ms. Beccera also received a scholarship from Bilingual Therapies and attended Binlingual Therapies' Bilingual Symposium in San Juan, Puerto Rico (2009). Research presentations have included: A Video Enthgraphy of Special Education in the Borderlands (presented at the NSSA Conference Las Vegas, Nevada 2009); Piecing Together The Future: using Second Life to teach individuals who work with children with special needs (presented at International Association for Development of the Information Society (IADIS) WWW/Internet 2009 Conference Rome, Italy 2010); Decreasing Overrepresentation of Spanish Speakers (presented at the Texas Speech and Hearing Association Conference, 2010); Mosiac (presented as the NSSA Conference Las Vegas, Nevada 2010); and Cruzando Frontreras (presented at the 2nd Annual Social Justice and Peace Conference, UTPA, 2010).

Ms. Beccera enjoys working with Student Council for Exceptional Children a student lead organization that advocates and promotes awareness for children with special needs and disabilities.