

# Victims and Victors: Representation of Physical Disability on the Silver Screen

Rhonda S. Black  
University of Hawai'i at Manoa

Lori Pretes  
Golden Gate Regional Center

*The portrayal of individuals with physical disabilities in feature films contributes to society's overall perception of disability (Nelson, 1994; Susman, 1994). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to analyze 18 films, produced between 1975 and 2004, that had a main character with a physical disability. Our analysis included specific themes and stereotypes identified by the research literature. The themes examined were (a) overall personality, (b) community integration, and (c) interpersonal relationships. The stereotypes examined were (a) pitiable and pathetic; (b) supercrip; (c) sinister, evil, and criminal; (d) better-off dead; (e) maladjusted—own worst enemy; (f) burden to family/society; and (g) unable to live a successful life (Biklen & Bogdan, 1977; Nelson, 1994). Most of the films developed the personality of the character with a disability. Healthy interpersonal relationships were portrayed in some of the films; however, on-going intimate relationships were rarely portrayed. Many of the movies portrayed integrated community life, but integrated education and employment opportunities were noticeably lacking. The most common stereotype portrayed in the films was maladjusted—own worst enemy; the two least common stereotypes were pitiable and pathetic, and sinister, evil and criminal. In some areas, filmmakers have made progress in dispelling myths and stereotypes described in the literature (e.g., dangerous monster, pitiable victim). In other areas, filmmakers continue to perpetuate damaging images (e.g., asexual beings, incapable of competitive employment or postsecondary education, who as a result of their inability to cope with the disability engage in self-destructive behaviors).*

**DESCRIPTORS:** physical disability, disabilities, films, attitudes toward disabilities, stereotypes

We are constantly exposed to the mass media. Whether from newspapers, magazines, television, or films, the mass media are a major source of information for a wide range of people. One such form of information and entertainment is feature films. With feature films becoming more accessible to the public through television and large

video rental companies, motion pictures may influence societal attitudes toward many issues and may have “a substantial impact on public attitudes toward individuals with disabilities” (Safran, 1998b, p. 467). Movies offer people a way to explore the unfamiliar in a safe environment. Therefore, if someone has not had direct experience with individuals with various disabilities, film depictions may be his or her primary source of information. “While movies entertain, they simultaneously provide viewers with information about disabilities, and, through the filmmaker’s lens, they project representations of how individuals fit into a nation’s social and political landscape” (Safran, 2001, p. 223).

Accurate portrayals are not always the focus of filmmakers (Norden, 1994), who may promote positive or negative images of individuals with disabilities (Safran, 1998a, 1998b). Yet, the lasting images that films create for millions of viewers ultimately shape public perceptions. Many individuals, especially children, assimilate as *real* the images that appear on film (Lawson & Fouts, 2004). “Media portrayals reflect, define, or perpetuate ways of thinking about disabled persons” (Susman, 1994, p. 18).

If movies portray individuals with disabilities as dependent victims or sullen objects of pity, then classmates, coworkers, and community members may be more likely to “see” individuals with disabilities through this *lens*. Moreover, these images influence the perceptions individuals with disabilities have of themselves (Norden, 1994).

## **Portrayals of Individuals With Disabilities in Feature Films**

Numerous studies have investigated the portrayal of individuals with disabilities in feature films. Safran (1998a) found that the percentage of Academy Award winning films with disability themes rose from 16.7% in the 1970s to 43% in the 1990s. Byrd and Pipes (1981) found that 8.7% of 287 films they sampled included a character with a disability; and psychiatric disabilities were the most frequently portrayed. In a similar study, Byrd and Elliot (1985) reviewed 1,051 films and found that 11.4% ( $n = 120$ ) of the films included 154 characters with a disability—most frequently, a psychiatric disability. In 1988, Byrd and Elliot further examined how frequently characters with disabilities were included in feature films. A total of 136 films portrayed 177 characters with disabilities.

Address all correspondence and reprint requests to Rhonda S. Black, Department of Special Education, 1776 University Avenue, Wist 127, Honolulu, HI 96822. E-mail: rblack@hawaii.edu

Again, psychiatric disabilities appeared most frequently (42%), followed by sensory disabilities (14%), neuromuscular disorders and cardiopulmonary and chronic illness (10%), and mental retardation (3%). Safran (1998a) similarly found that psychiatric disabilities were the most frequently portrayed disability in Academy Award winning films.

Byrd (1989) studied specific characteristics of characters with disabilities in film. Variables such as major versus minor role, gender, normalcy of personality, attractiveness, victim or hero status, institutionalization, family membership, social relations, social class, employment status, age category, and type of disability were examined. Sixty-seven characters were portrayed as having a disability in 53 of 302 films. Byrd concluded that "the typical portrayal of disability was by a major character who was male and chemically dependent, who had an abnormal personality and was victimized in some fashion, but was socially related to another character in the film, was not institutionalized, had no occupation, came from a middle class background, and was middle aged" (p. 43). Across studies then, a pattern of stereotypes present in feature films has emerged.

### ***Stereotypes in Feature Films***

Ableism which is defined as "discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities, especially physical disabilities" (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000) has many similarities to racism and sexism and other *isms* associated with discriminatory practices. Oftentimes, the film industry presents people with disabilities in a variety of stereotypical ways, thus perpetuating ableist stereotypes.

Several stereotypes of people with disabilities have barraged the public throughout the years. Nelson (1994) discussed seven common stereotypes largely based on the work of Biklen and Bogdan (1977). These stereotypes were (a) pitiable and pathetic, (b) supercrip, (c) sinister, evil, and criminal, (d) better-off dead, (e) maladjusted, his or her own worst enemy, (f) a burden, and (g) unable to live a successful life.

The first stereotype, pitiable and pathetic, is evident in telethons which portray individuals with disabilities as childlike, incompetent, and in need of care or a cure from nondisabled people (Nelson, 1994). In other words, disability is a tragedy which calls for sympathy and charity (Shapiro, 1994).

The second stereotype, "supercrip," portrays the individual with a disability as exhibiting great courage, stamina, and determination to overcome his or her disability. This individual then serves as a motivational role model for others but may lead individuals with disabilities into feeling like failures if they have not accomplished something extraordinary (Nelson, 1994). "While prodigious achievement is praiseworthy in anyone, disabled or not, it does not reflect the day-to-day reality of most disabled people" (Shapiro, 1994, p. 17).

The third stereotype, sinister, evil, and criminal (Longmore, 1985), implies that individuals with disabilities are somehow less than human (Nelson, 1994). Additionally, by giving disabilities to villainous characters, three common prejudices are reinforced: (a) disability is a punishment for evil; (b) people with disabilities are embittered by their "fate," and (c) people with disabilities resent the nondisabled and would, if possible, destroy them (Longmore, 1985). Bogdan, Biklen, Shapiro, and Spelkoman (1982) suggested that the associated imagery of disability with violence or ugliness may be a result of deep-rooted fears which remind healthy people of their own imperfections. By reinforcing such stereotypes in the media, society's prejudices are preserved, resulting in fear of people with disabilities and consequently their systematic intentional exclusion from society (Bogdan et al., 1982).

The fourth stereotype, better-off dead, presents the individual with a disability as having a life that is clearly not worth living and suggests that suicide could serve as a release from his or her catastrophic condition (Longmore, 1985). This stereotype promotes the idea that disability means total physical dependence, misery, and deprivation of autonomy and self-determination. Because death becomes a preferred alternative, society is no longer responsible for dealing with long-term needs and rights of people with disabilities (Nelson, 1994). This stereotype fails to take into account rehabilitation or the use of assistive technology to improve quality of life or, more importantly, the right to be disabled (Kunc, n.d.).

The fifth stereotype, maladjusted and his or her own worst enemy, promotes the idea that people with disabilities need insight about themselves and the world from those without disabilities. This stems from the idea that disability is primarily a problem of emotional coping and personal acceptance, and that with the proper attitude anyone can cope with and overcome any situation or condition. This stereotype ignores societal stigma and discrimination (Longmore, 1985) and creates the notion that accomplishment or defeat ultimately depends on one's attitude toward oneself and toward life.

The sixth stereotype, a burden, is perpetuated by showing the great weight on families/caregivers of individuals with disabilities. It shifts the focus away from the individual with a disability and bestows near sainthood upon the caring adults in his or her life. "This stereotype is often used on the screen as a device to show the nobility and generosity of those who furnish care, making the disabled person little more than a prop rather than a human being capable of interacting with others to the profit of both" (Nelson, 1994, p. 9).

The final stereotype (Biklen & Bogdan, 1977; Nelson, 1994), unable to live a successful life, is perpetuated by lamenting loss of personally fulfilling roles, occupations, or leisure interests and by defining characters by their disabilities rather than by their personal characteristics.

Until recently, popular films have not featured people with disabilities leading happy lives or participating actively as members of the community. In addition, popular films have not featured people with disabilities as workers, family members, lovers, or in any of the roles that films typically assigned to actors playing people without disabilities.

With the passage of landmark educational and civil rights laws [e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)], there has been movement toward educational and community integration of individuals with disabilities. It would be expected that as this trend toward inclusion continues, there would be a breakdown of educational, architectural, and attitudinal barriers which would be reflected in the images we see in feature films.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

The purpose of this study was to analyze how individuals with physical disabilities are portrayed in feature films. The number of feature films that included one or more portrayals of characters with disabilities has been steadily increasing since the 1970s (Safran, 1998a). However, key questions remain. To what extent do feature films portray these characters in a positive light? To what extent do these films depict, and thereby promote, the progressive inclusion of individuals with disabilities into American society? We designed this study to examine portrayals according to three themes strongly suggested by Byrd (1989)—personality, community integration, and interpersonal relationships—and the presence or absence of seven stereotypes previously noted in the research literature (Nelson, 1994).

## **Method**

### ***Film Selection***

We chose to select films involving characters with physical disabilities for several reasons. First, many films portray characters with mental illness, mild intellectual disabilities, or physical disfigurement. These disabilities, however, do not meet the U.S. Census Bureau guidelines of severe disabilities which states "people age 15 and over were identified as having a *severe disability* if they were unable to perform one or more functional activities; needed personal assistance with an [activity of daily living] or [instrumental activity of daily living]; used a wheelchair; were a long-term user of a cane, crutches, or a walker..." (McNeil, 1997, p. 1). Second, physical disabilities are visible disabilities and are less subject to scrutiny regarding whether one actually has a disability. Physical disabilities are in the public eye; thus, we can examine public reaction based on the disability and not some *hidden* or *unknown* characteristic of the person/character. Third, anyone could become part of the oppressed minority of those with physical disabilities at any time (as opposed to mental retardation or autism which are developmental disabilities),

as highlighted by the slogan "temporarily able-bodied" used by some disability rights activists (Shapiro, 1994). Therefore, it is important to examine public perceptions and portrayals of such disabilities.

Finally, there are a large number of films focusing on disability in general. Several authors have approached the task of reviewing disability films quantitatively by stating the number of movies or the number of characters that appeared within in feature films within a certain period (Byrd, 1989; Byrd & Elliot, 1985; Byrd & Pipes, 1981; Safran, 1998a). Others have qualitatively explored a few films in great depth (Carter-Long, 2005; Darke, 1999). We chose the middle ground by narrowing the focus to one disability type and by providing some comparative analysis between films based on prior research literature.

We located films for review by searching the worldwide Web and several databases (e.g., University of California at Berkeley Library, [www.disabilitystudies.com](http://www.disabilitystudies.com), [www.disabilityfilms.co.uk](http://www.disabilityfilms.co.uk)). We used various combinations of search terms such as "disability," "physical disability," "movies," and "films." We also located movies mentioned in the research literature, contemporary magazines and books on the topic.

Six criteria were used to select films. We selected films that were produced between 1975 (the year PL 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed) and 2004. Second, the films were feature length and produced by a major studio for profit and widespread distribution (e.g., we excluded documentaries and films of limited distribution). We defined "widespread distribution" as films available for home viewing through mainstream rental companies such as Blockbuster, Netflix, etc., and not limited to small private, specialty rental companies, university libraries, or Broadway archives. We also used box office revenue to determine widespread distribution ([www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=disability-paraplegic.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=disability-paraplegic.htm)). Third, the films had a main character with a permanent physical disability. We separated the disabilities into three categories: (a) acquired through accident, (b) acquired through a degenerative disease, or (c) present from birth. Fourth, the character's disability *substantially limited one or more major life activities* (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990) and required assistance from another person in a paid or unpaid position. Fifth, the disability affected the character's mobility. Finally, we excluded films in which the character had a sensory disability (auditory or visual) or included a physical disfigurement, unless the film met all of the aforementioned qualifying criteria. Table 1 provides a brief summary of each movie.

### ***Evaluation Tool***

After reviewing the professional literature regarding portrayal of disability in film, we developed two rubrics to evaluate each film. We developed the first rubric based on three categories: personality, community

Table 1  
Brief Synopses of Films Reviewed by Source of Disability and Chronology

| Film title (year produced, director) actors                                                                                    | Synopses (awards)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Acquired disability from accident (spinal cord injury–paraplegia and quadriplegia)</b>                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <i>Coming Home</i> (1978, Hal, Ashby)<br>Jon Voight and Jane Fonda                                                             | Luke Martin, who served as a Marine in Vietnam returns paralyzed from the waist down. Highlighting the difficulties of war-wounded returned veterans, the film had a strong anti-war message. Notably, Luke was portrayed as a sexual being in a relationship with a married woman who volunteered at the rehabilitation center where Luke was placed upon his return stateside. The film showed Luke's initial stages of anger changing to acceptance as he reintegrates into the community and starts helping other veterans. The film shows an adapted car and installing ramps for residential access (1979 Academy Award winner—best actor, actress and screenplay).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <i>Whose Life Is It Anyway?</i> (1981, John Badham)<br>Richard Dreyfuss and John Cassavetes                                    | Ken Harrison was injured in an automobile accident and paralyzed from the neck down. The audience sees Ken's adjustment to the reality that he will no longer be able to sculpt, which had been his passion. Although it meant death, Ken fought for release from the hospital. The movie focused on his right to refuse treatment, and whether he was competent to make such a decision. Eventually, a judge decided Ken was not clinically depressed and that he had the right to be discharged from the hospital. The hospital then agreed to discontinue life support, while allowing him to die in his hospital bed framed by his own sculptural interpretation of the forearm and hand of God from Michelangelo's <i>Creation of Man</i> (Tony award winning play, film did not win Academy Awards).                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>Born on the Fourth of July</i> <sup>a</sup> (1987, Oliver Stone)<br>Tom Cruise and Kyra Sedgwick                            | The biographical story of Ron Kovic, a Vietnam veteran who was paralyzed from the waist down, focuses on Ron's difficulties upon returning to the United States and the horrible conditions of the rehabilitation center. Ron returned to his family home but continued to experience difficulties adapting to his new situation. He moved through stages of anger, grief, and self-pity; to self-destruction with alcohol, drugs, and prostitutes; and finally to empowerment and advocacy as he became an anti-war activist and spokesperson. This film also showed installing ramps and widening doorways for residential access (1989 Academy Award winner—best director and best editing, nominated for 6 awards).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>Monkey Shines: An Experiment in Terror</i> (1988, George Romero)<br>Jason Beghe, John Pankow, and Kate McNeil               | Allan becomes quadriplegic after being hit by a truck while jogging. With some assistance Allen lives independently. He is fully equipped with a mouth-operated wheelchair, voice-command operated music, light and other household items, and Ella, a helping monkey. Ella, however, has been genetically altered and telepathically "sees" and enacts Allan's darkest wishes. Allan's rage increases as Ella gets more into his thoughts and her actions become more deadly. The Helping Hands Program at Boston University trains Capuchin helping monkeys. Monkeys in this movie used techniques from that program. This was the only science fiction horror movie reviewed (Catalonian International Film Festival—best actress, best director, best screenplay).                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>The Waterdance</i> (1992, Neil Jimenez and Michael Steinburg)<br>Eric Stolz, Helen Hunt, Wesley Snipes, and William Forsyth | A young novelist, Joel Garcia, was paralyzed from the waist down due to a spinal cord injury acquired in a hiking accident. The film took place in a rehabilitation center and focused on physical and psychological issues faced by individuals who experience these types of injuries as they adapt to their new living situations. The film only showed a brief period during their stay at a rehabilitation hospital. The movie focused on Joel's relationships with his girlfriend and other patients at the center, especially two men (an African-American ladies' man and a racist biker) who had also recently become paralyzed. Writer and director, Jimenez, "who personally lives with the same condition, gives us an insider's point-of-view on the first terrible days, weeks, and months of adjusting to paralysis, and its effect upon relationships, work, and sex" (Keough, n.d.) (Independent Spirit and Sundance Film Festival awards). |
| <i>Passion Fish</i> (1992, John Sayles)<br>Mary McDonnell and Alfre Woodard                                                    | A successful soap opera star acquires a spinal cord injury in a car accident. She returns to her family home in Louisiana and starts drinking heavily. Her acerbic interpersonal interactions alienate several nurses. Her "last chance" nurse, who is coming out of drug rehabilitation, has her own issues including proving to her father that she is worthy of reuniting with her child. The movie focuses on how these two women become friends. While the film deals with issues relating to acquired disability (e.g., paraplegia), it focuses more on recovery from substance abuse (1993 Academy Awards two nominations—best actress, best screenplay).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <i>Breaking The Waves</i> (1996, Lars von Trier)<br>Emily Watson and Stellan Skarsgaard                                        | In a deeply religious community in northern Scotland, a young naive and sexually inexperienced woman, Bess, meets and falls in love with an off-shore oil rig worker, Jan. Bess prays to God that Jan will return and never have to leave her again. When an accident sends him home paralyzed, Bess is filled with guilt. Under the assumption that they can no longer enjoy a sexual relationship, Jan urges Bess to take other lovers and tell him the details. She is convinced this will aid in his recovery and becomes more and more deviant in her sexual behavior. Her increasingly risky acts lead to several incidents of battering and eventually her death. Ironically, Jan is able to walk with the aid of a cane at the time of her funeral (1997 Academy Award nomination for best actress, 40 wins and 13 nominations at various film festivals—best foreign film, actress, and director).                                                  |

Table 1  
(continued)

| Film title (year produced, director) actors                                                                        | Synopses (awards)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Gattaca</i> (1997, Andrew Niccol)<br>Ethan Hawke,<br>Uma Thurman,<br>Jude Law, and<br>Gore Vidal                | A futuristic film about Vincent who was one of the last "natural" babies born into a genetically enhanced world. Because he was born with a heart condition, Vincent's lifelong dream of being a navigator on a space mission was an impossibility until he assumed the identity of Jerome. Jerome was a genetically engineered man of similar age and physical features (he had been an athlete) who had been in an accident which immobilized his legs. Jerome and Vincent go through elaborate procedures to ensure that Vincent passed daily gene tests taken from hair, skin, blood, and urine samples. Jerome was willing to relinquish his identity because he felt unable to live a fulfilling life because of his disability. The film examined ethical issues such as genetic discrimination, the fallibility of genetic engineering due to accidents, and the value and quality of life for individuals with disabilities in a society where physical perfection is not only expected, but manufactured. Those who were genetically engineered were called "valids" and those who were natural born with human faults were "invalids." Ironically, the man with a physical disability was a "valid" while his able-bodied counterpart was the "invalid" (1998 Academy Award nomination for best art/set direction). |
| <i>The Bone Collector</i><br>(1999, Phillip Noyce)<br>Denzel Washington,<br>Angelina Jolie, and<br>Queen Latifa    | Based on a Jeffery Deaver novel, Lincoln Rhyme, a NYPD forensics expert, is able only to move his head and one finger following a workplace accident. Through impressive assistive technology and the help of a loving nurse he is able to live in his own apartment and manipulate his environment. Rhymes had made arrangements for an assisted suicide until a serial killer captures his interest and gives him a reason to live. He mentors a young police officer who becomes his on-site person for crime scenes. They develop a close relationship and in the last scene (long after the crimes have been solved) the two are apparently married. This was the only murder mystery reviewed (Nomination for best supporting actress—Black Reel and Image Awards; Nomination for best actress—Blockbuster Entertainment Awards).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>The Sea Inside</i> <sup>a</sup> (2004, Alejandro Amenabar)<br>Javier Bardem,<br>Belen Rueda, and<br>Lola Dueñas | <i>The Sea Inside</i> is based on the true story of Ramon Sampedro who was paralyzed (quadriplegia) in a diving accident. For nearly 30 years he has made the most of it through writing and developing close relationships with his family, who all help to care for him. But, he has come to see his life as pointless and enlists the help of a "Right to Die" organization. The film explores his love for two women Julia, a lawyer who supports his cause and who also has a degenerative physical disability, and Rosa, a local woman who wants to convince him that life is worth living. At the center is the conflict between those who are helping to persuade the courts to let him end his own life and those who want him to want to live (2005 Academy Award winner for best foreign language film; European Film Awards, best actor and director for 2004; National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, top five foreign films for 2004).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>Million Dollar Baby</i><br>(2004, Clint Eastwood)<br>Hillary Swank,<br>Morgan Freeman,<br>Clint Eastwood        | Maggie (Hillary Swank) wants to enter to world of professional boxing. Frankie (Clint Eastwood) begrudgingly agrees to train her. The story focuses on Maggie's tremendous will and determination. She deeply desires someone to believe in her and finally finds that in Frankie. When Maggie is paralyzed (quadriplegia) from a sucker punch in the world championship match, her life changes as does Frankie's. Averse to being kept alive by machines to help her breathe, she tries to kill herself. After much soul-searching Frankie helps her (2005 Academy Awards winner best picture, director, actress, and supporting actor; National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, top 10 films for 2004).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Acquired disability from degenerative disease—multiple sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS)</b>                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <i>Go Now</i> (1995, Michael Winterbottom)<br>Robert Carlyle and<br>Juliet Aubrey                                  | <i>Go Now</i> is the story of Nick, a British soccer player and construction worker who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. The film takes the viewer through Nick's struggle with accepting changes that were occurring in his body, and how as his condition progressed it affected his relationships with others. Because the viewer gets to know a bit about Nick's life before the onset of his disability, it is possible to determine how the disability itself affected many aspects of his daily living and community integration (1996 three prestigious European awards).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>Theory of Flight</i> (1998, Paul Greengrass)<br>Helena Bonham Carter<br>and Kenneth Branagh                     | The main character in <i>Theory of Flight</i> , Jane, played by Helena Bonham Carter, is a young woman with Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS). While the disease had taken its toll on Jane's physical body, her brain was as sharp as ever. A frustrated artist, Richard, sentenced to community service for destroying property was assigned to provide respite care for Jane. She was, at first, quite resentful and very critical of Richard's choice of recreational outings. She revealed to him that she wanted to do more age-appropriate activities. More specifically, she wanted to lose her virginity and she wanted him to arrange for that to happen. The remainder of the film focused on trying to find Jane a sexual partner through a series of hair-brained schemes. Meanwhile, Richard puts together an airplane out of paintings and junk because he always dreamed of flying. This movie showed Jane's desire for intimacy, connection, and romance (1999 winner of the Brussels International film festival, best European Feature film).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

Table 1  
(continued)

| Film title (year produced, director) actors                                                                       | Synopses (awards)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Freak City</i> (1999, Lynne Littman)<br>Samantha Mathis, Peter Sarsgaard, Natalie Cole, and Jonathan Silverman | <i>Freak City</i> is a film about a Ruth, a young woman with multiple sclerosis, who after her grandmother passed away, was forced to live in a rehabilitation care center. The film followed her attempt to acquire legal aid to assist her in moving out of the treatment facility. While at first Ruth felt abandoned and hopeless, she later became friends with other "gimps" (people who relied on wheelchairs) and "goons" (people with cognitive disabilities) who became her new social support network. The film described each character's struggle with dependence vs. independence as each tried to find his or her own best balance (one nomination from the Writers Guild of America).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Lifetime disability—present from birth—cerebral palsy</b>                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <i>Gaby</i> <sup>a</sup> (1987, Luis Mandoki)<br>Rachel Levin, Liv Ullman, and Robert Loggia                      | <i>Gaby</i> is a biographical film about Gaby Brimmer, who was born with cerebral palsy in 1948 to wealthy Jewish refugee parents residing in Mexico City. Gaby was a very bright young woman who with the help of her nanny, Florencia Morales, learned to communicate through writing, and later typing, with her toes. Gaby attended school in a rehabilitation center with other individuals with disabilities until she challenged the entry exams and became the first person with a significant disability to go through high school and the university in Mexico City. Gaby had a very close relationship with her nanny who became a lifelong caregiver and companion. Florencia went everywhere with Gaby and served as her hands and mode of transportation. The film showed Gaby's life from childhood through adulthood where she became a distinguished writer (1988 Academy Award nomination for best supporting actress).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>My Left Foot</i> <sup>a</sup> (1989, Jim Sheridan)<br>Daniel Day-Lewis and Brenda Fricker                      | <i>My Left Foot</i> is a true story about Christy Brown, who was born with cerebral palsy into a poor, large, working-class Irish family. Because Christy was only able to move his left leg and his head, his mother and siblings carted him around the neighborhood in a wooden wagon. Christy's mother believed in his capabilities and relentlessly cared for and taught him. Through flashbacks, the film takes the viewer through his life and the struggles he encountered with mobility and communication. Christy spoke only in guttural sounds but learned to communicate by writing with his left foot. Christy eventually became a successful painter, poet, and author. He was a well-respected part of his community and despite his cantankerous, brooding nature, he had many friends (1989 Academy Award winner best actor, best supporting actress, Golden Globe two nominations, Bogota Film Festival winner best actor, best score, best sound).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>Door to Door</i> <sup>a</sup> (2002, Steven Schacter)<br>William Macy and Kyra Sedgwick                        | <i>Door to Door</i> is a biographical film about Bill Porter, who despite experiencing cerebral palsy, was a door-to-door salesperson, following in the footsteps of his deceased father. Initially Bill was denied employment because of his disability which slightly affected his speech, strength, and coordination, but he convinced the company to give him their worst route and allow him to prove himself. He stated, "what have you got to lose?" Bill took to the route well. He experienced the typical job-associated frustrations, but got to know his customers and became a part of their daily joys and struggles. In fact, Bill became part of the community, often acting as a peacemaker in disputes between neighbors. After his mother died, Bill lived independently, but needed to hire an assistant to help with household chores and carrying his deliveries. His assistant, Shelley, stayed with him for decades. Bill received awards for his salesmanship and was a valuable employee and community member. However, with telephone and Internet sales, the days of the door-to-door sales are a thing of the past. The film shows how Bill's sales talents were made obsolete (Golden Globe best actor nomination and Screen Actors Guild winner best actor). |
| <i>Oasis</i> (2002, Chang-dong Lee)<br>Kyung-gu Sol and So-ri Moon <i>Korean</i>                                  | Jong-du, a young man with mild mental retardation, is newly released from prison after serving a two-year term for involuntary manslaughter for killing a man while driving drunk. He visits the man's home to try to make amends and meets the man's daughter, Gong-ju, who has cerebral palsy, and can barely speak. Her elder brother takes money from the State to care for her but keeps her confined in a small apartment, oftentimes alone. The brother takes Gong-ju to his nice home only when the "authorities" come to check in on her. Jong-du knows the girl is alone and comes into the apartment and rapes her. However, he does so not out of malice or power, but because he likes her and does not know how to express himself to a young woman. Ironically, they form a caring relationship. Jong-du's family wants little to do with him, until they learn of the relationship. They try to keep the two apart, as does her brother who has been relatively unconcerned about her life until then (Eleven film festival awards for director, actor, and actress).                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

<sup>a</sup>Biographical film.

integration, and interpersonal relationships (see Table 2). The first category was the extent to which the character with a disability had a fully developed personality, or whether the character was defined primarily by his or her disability. The second category was community integration that included areas such as integrated education and employment, residential environment, community participation, recreation, and social activities. The third category, interpersonal relationships, was based on the Circle of Friends (Falvey, Forest, Pearpoint, & Rosenberg, 1997) to assess the types of interpersonal relationships and social support present in the character's life.

We created the second rubric (Table 4) based on the presence or absence of seven stereotypes identified by Nelson (1994) and Biklen and Bogdan (1977). These stereotypes were (a) pitiable and pathetic; (b) supercrip; (c) sinister, evil, and criminal; (d) better-off dead; (e) maladjusted—own worst enemy; (f) burden to family/society; and (g) unable to live a successful life.

### Review and Rating of Films

We viewed the films separately using the rubrics mentioned above to guide our ratings (Tables 2 and 4). Themes were rated using a numeric score of one to four for each of the three categories, and stereotypes were scored as plus or minus (presence or absence of the stereotype). Tables 2 and 4 describe the scoring criteria for themes and stereotypes. We compared ratings, discussed discrepancies, came to consensus, and calculated means and standard deviations for each theme [using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)], and a total score for each stereotype. We then looked for commonalities within the themes and stereotypes. With results and ratings of each movie in-hand, we separately reviewed each film again to see if it was "true"

to our initial ratings and noted additional insights. At this point, we again discussed each film and made some slight changes, given the more holistic view of the films (how each film compared to the other films).

## Results

### Themes

We reviewed each film and analyzed the main character with a physical disability according to three themes (a) personality, (b) community integration, and (c) interpersonal relationships.

#### Personality

We rated the extent to which the film portrayed the character as an individual with a distinct and unique personality (e.g., humorous, social, friendly), or whether the character's disability was the primary focal point. Of the three themes, *personality* had the most positive ratings ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ). Table 3 lists individual ratings for each of the 18 movies.

Three films were given a score of four for depicting individuals with disabilities as having unique personalities. *Door to Door* featured a character born with cerebral palsy, *Go Now's* main character had multiple sclerosis, and *The Waterdance* focused on three main characters with spinal cord injuries. In *Door-to-Door*, Bill Porter expressed his feelings clearly, especially with respect to maintaining independence and not wanting pity. The film depicted his personality as that of a dedicated salesperson rather than focusing on his disability. In *Go Now*, the audience sees Nick before the onset of his disability; therefore, the viewer gains insight into his thoughts and feelings as his physical condition progressively deteriorates. After his friends began treating

Table 2  
Rubric for Evaluating Themes in the Selected Films

| Rating | Personality of the disabled character                                                                                                        | Community integration                                                                                                                                        | Interpersonal relationships                                                                                                      |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1      | Character's personality is not developed. Focus is on the disability, not the <i>person</i> with the disability.                             | Character with a disability is not integrated in any area of community life (i.e., education, employment, or recreation). Character rarely leaves residence. | Character with a disability has no relationships other than with paid caregivers or family.                                      |
| 2      | Personality of the character is slightly developed. There is more focus on the disability than on individual personality traits.             | Character leaves residence occasionally for recreation but is not integrated into the community.                                                             | Character has acquaintances and/or paid caregivers but no close friends.                                                         |
| 3      | Character has distinct personality traits. The character is an <i>individual</i> with a disability and not solely defined by the disability. | Character is partially integrated in the community, either in employment, education, and/or recreation.                                                      | Character has friends and acquaintances; natural supports.                                                                       |
| 4      | Character has a well-developed personality. Viewer can get "inside" the character's mind to see motives, hopes, dreams, likes, and dislikes. | Character is fully integrated in his or her community. Community participation is portrayed in a number of ways.                                             | Character has friends and acquaintances and at least one close intimate relationship; many natural supports—a circle of friends. |

Table 3  
Summary Ratings for Each Film by Themes (Listed in Order—Most Positive to Least Positive)

| Movie                             | Personality | Community integration | Interpersonal relationships | Mean (SD)   |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| Acquired disability from accident |             |                       |                             |             |
| Monkey Shines                     | 3           | 4                     | 4                           | 3.67 (0.58) |
| The Waterdance                    | 4           | <sup>a</sup>          | 3                           | 3.50 (0.71) |
| Bone Collector                    | 3           | 3                     | 3                           | 3.00 (0.00) |
| Coming Home                       | 3           | 3                     | 3                           | 3.00 (0.00) |
| Born on the Fourth of July        | 3           | 3                     | 2                           | 2.67 (0.58) |
| Passion Fish                      | 3           | 2                     | 3                           | 2.67 (0.58) |
| Whose Life Is It Anyway?          | 3           | <sup>a</sup>          | 2                           | 2.50 (0.71) |
| Million Dollar Baby               | 3           | <sup>a</sup>          | 2                           | 2.50 (0.71) |
| The Sea Inside                    | 3           | 1                     | 3                           | 2.33 (1.15) |
| Breaking the Waves                | 2           | <sup>a</sup>          | 3                           | 2.00 (0.71) |
| Gattaca                           | 2           | 1                     | 1                           | 1.33 (0.58) |
| Acquired disability from disease  |             |                       |                             |             |
| Go Now                            | 4           | 4                     | 4                           | 4.00 (0.00) |
| Theory of Flight                  | 3           | 1                     | 2                           | 2.00 (1.00) |
| Freak City                        | 3           | 1                     | 2                           | 2.00 (1.00) |
| Lifetime disability               |             |                       |                             |             |
| Door To Door                      | 4           | 4                     | 3                           | 3.67 (0.58) |
| My Left Foot                      | 3           | 4                     | 3                           | 3.33 (0.58) |
| Gaby                              | 3           | 3                     | 3                           | 3.00 (0.00) |
| Oasis                             | 2           | 1                     | 2                           | 1.67 (0.58) |
| Mean (SD)                         | 3.00 (0.59) | 2.50 (1.29)           | 2.67 (0.77)                 |             |

<sup>a</sup>We were unable to assess due to the hospital setting of the film.

him differently, Nick makes a poignant statement about his mind being the same despite changes occurring in his body. In *The Waterdance*, the three main characters with spinal cord injuries all had well-developed personalities. Joel was a writer who had an on-going relationship with a married woman. Through extensive dialogue, the audience gets a sense of his thoughts, his frustrations with himself, with others, and with his romantic situation. Raymond was an African American ladies' man whose wife asks for a divorce while he is in the rehabilitation center. The third character was a racist

biker who surprisingly becomes very good friends with Raymond. The audience is able to get a clear picture of each individual's unique personality and how it interacted with and influenced adaptation and adjustment to living with a disability.

The majority of films (12) received a rating of three. *My Left Foot* and *Gaby* (both true stories of lifelong disability) portray individuals with cerebral palsy. *My Left Foot* portrays Christy Brown as having an engaging, yet cantankerous personality, especially when he drank alcohol. His speech was labored, so oftentimes the audience

Table 4  
Stereotypes (Nelson, 1994; Based Largely on the Work of Biklen & Bogdan, 1977)

| Stereotypes                    | Description                                                                                                                                   | Ratings                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pitiable and pathetic          | Individual with disability is portrayed as childlike and incompetent; viewer is led to feel sorry for the character                           | + Character is portrayed as having many or all of these qualities. Stereotype is present in the film.     |
| Supercrip                      | Individual with disability through great courage triumphs over their disability heroically                                                    | — Character is portrayed as having few or none of these qualities. Stereotype is not present in the film. |
| Sinister, evil, and criminal   | The person with a disability is portrayed as evil, a dangerous monster or "less than human"                                                   |                                                                                                           |
| Better-off dead                | Person with disability's life is not worth living; disability is seen as unbearable                                                           |                                                                                                           |
| Maladjusted—own worst enemy    | Bitter and full of self-pity because he or she cannot handle the disability; needs insight and guidance from individuals without disabilities |                                                                                                           |
| Burden                         | Person with disability is a burden to family members, friends, and the overall community                                                      |                                                                                                           |
| Unable to live successful life | Unable to live a full and happy life; seldom seen in situations working, socializing, or enjoying oneself                                     |                                                                                                           |

is left to make a leap of faith regarding what Christy was thinking and feeling. *Gaby's* distinct personality was displayed through interpreters reading her notes and writings, because her speech, too, was labored. However, the movie did emphasize Gaby's capabilities and persistence. In both *My Left Foot* and *Gaby* the filmmakers focused on others' reactions to the characters' disabilities and the characters' outer accomplishments more than their inner lives (i.e., thoughts, emotions, hopes, dreams, and internal reactions to how others perceived them).

The characters in *Coming Home*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Passion Fish*, *Monkey Shines*, *The Sea Inside*, and *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* all acquired their disabilities through an accident. The first two films, *Coming Home* and *Born on the Fourth of July* focused on Vietnam veterans who had distinct personalities. However, these personality traits were related to the disability. At first, both were angry, bitter, and destructive/self-destructive. Later, both became committed to fighting against the war through protest and helping other veterans. Both films sent a message that the characters' war-related disabilities were the focal point of their lives. *Passion Fish* had a similar story line in that the character, a former actress, was bitter and self-destructive in the initial stages of coming to terms with her acquired disability. She later formed friendship bonds with the woman hired to care for her while they both fought their personal demons. In *Monkey Shines*, the character had clear personality traits. Many of these traits, however, were related to his disability such as anger at caregivers, his girlfriend, and his surgeon.

*The Sea Inside* and *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* portrayed men with distinct personalities who were fighting to legally end their lives. They were talented artists, yet the plots centered on legal battles instead of their creativity. Personality traits such as determination and persistence were portrayed within the context of a steadfast belief that life with a disability was a life not worth living. *The Bone Collector* similarly portrayed a character who was planning to end his life until a challenging case of a serial killer renewed his will to live. At this point, the focus turned to personality traits related to his expertise in forensics, not his inner life.

*Theory of Flight* and *Freak City* both had main characters who acquired their disabilities through degenerative diseases, ALS, and multiple sclerosis. In *Theory of Flight*, the character, Jane, had a very dynamic personality. She was opinionated, strong-willed, and had a sarcastic sense of humor. However, much of her humor was self-deprecating and focused on her disability. In *Freak City* the main character was a headstrong young woman seeking legal assistance to be released from the rehabilitation hospital where she had been placed against her wishes. At first, she was angry and bitter and reacted with disdain to welcoming gestures of other residents. Eventually she became friends with several residents and

advocated for their independence. However, when an opportunity arose for her to leave the facility, she did not.

Three films received a score of two. *Oasis* (lifelong disability), *Breaking the Waves*, and *Gattaca* (disability acquired through accident) had characters whose personalities were only slightly developed, focusing more on the disability than the person. The character in *Oasis* was a lonely shut-in. The audience sees her desires only through dream scenes where she "sees" herself interacting with her "boyfriend" in a nondisabled body, thus focusing on her disability, and implying that her desires can only be fulfilled with a nondisabled body. *Gattaca* focused on the character with a disability giving up his genetic identity because he felt his life was worthless after losing the use of his legs. *Breaking the Waves* focuses on the character's acquired disability and how it became a destructive influence in his wife's life.

Within the *personality* theme overall, traits such as anger, bitterness, and self-destruction were portrayed frequently; as were determination, persistence, and fighting for a cause.

### Community Integration

For the theme of *community integration*, we evaluated integrated education and employment, community access, independent living (or satisfying basic living needs), recreation, and attending social events. This theme had the most variation with four films earning a score of four, four films earning scores of three, one film earning a score of 2, and five films earning a score of only one ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ). Four films were not rated in this category. *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*, *Million Dollar Baby*, and *Breaking the Waves* all took place in hospitals; therefore, rating the degree of community integration portrayed was not appropriate. Similarly, *The Waterdance* was not rated because it took place in a rehabilitation hospital. While there was mention of barriers to finding employment and an accessible residence, the audience does not see the characters once they actually leave the facility.

Four films (*My Left Foot*, *Door to Door*, *Monkey Shines*, and *Go Now*) earned a score of four for this theme. *My Left Foot* received a four because Christy Brown was seen participating in his community even as a child. He was integrated into activities such as games of kickball with other youth in the neighborhood. Although Christy did not attend public school, we assigned the highest possible rating because the movie was based on the facts of the times, and not merely the filmmakers' judgments about whether a character should or should not be depicted as participating in inclusive schooling. As an adult Christy was competitively employed because he found niches and created opportunities with art, literature, and poetry. Christy attended social events with many nondisabled friends, dined at restaurants, and had a visible presence in the community. In *Door to Door* the audience sees Bill Porter, a door-to-door salesperson, as a fixture in the community. He was very

involved in the lives of his customers and was included in community activities. When he first applied for a job in sales, the employer was reluctant to hire a "cripple," but eventually agreed to let Bill prove himself. Of all the movies reviewed, this movie showed the most integrated employment. Bill worked with nondisabled peers, did not require accommodations from the company, and earned awards for his productivity. He took care of himself and his basic living needs with minimal assistance. The character in *Monkey Shines* had a "helping animal," a monkey, to assist him with living independently. He also had an array of assistive technology devices that were activated by a mouth control attached to his wheelchair. This character attended a college class and went into the community and nature (camping with a new girlfriend). *Go Now* also portrayed a character who was integrated into the community. A good portion of the film took place prior to the onset of the disability, so the audience is able to see Nick's predisability life and routines. As his condition worsened, Nick still participated in many of the same activities, including going out with his friends and girlfriend.

*Coming Home*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *The Bone Collector*, and *Gaby* all received a score of three. In *Coming Home*, the main character was initially in a rehabilitation hospital and eventually moved into an apartment. He bought a car that had been mechanically adapted and participated in many aspects of community living quite independently. However, Luke did not appear to have any vocational or postsecondary educational opportunities available to him. He volunteered as a guest speaker, but the viewer is led to believe his primary source of income is, and always will be, Veterans Administration (VA) benefits. In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic did achieve full community integration toward the end of the movie when he became a political activist. However, a larger portion of the movie focused on barriers to integration, Ron's joining a group of other disabled veterans in Mexico and his poor treatment at the Veteran's hospital. The movie also did not show opportunities for integrated employment other than being a political activist. The film did show Ron's father installing ramps and widening doorways of the family home in preparation for Ron's return, thus highlighting issues surrounding accessible housing. Substantial portions of the film focused on raising awareness regarding segregation in community activities and employment. *The Bone Collector* displayed an impressive array of assistive technology to help the character achieve expertise in his employment situation. Because of an accompanying seizure disorder, other characters came to his home rather than the character going into the community. This film portrayed the character as a well-respected expert in his field (forensic science) with a valued role in the community. *Gaby* participated in integrated education at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. She was self-employed as a writer and participated in social and

community activities. However, her caregiver was always there or just around the corner, thus limiting her community integration to some degree. Interestingly, Gaby became an adoptive parent with the assistance of her caregiver. This true story showed remarkable strides in integrated education, employment, and the right to be a parent. But, the audience is left wondering if someone without such plentiful financial resources would have the same opportunities.

*Passion Fish* received a rating of two. Most of the story took place at the main character's family home in rural Louisiana, to which she returned following her accident. At first she would not leave the house. As the story progresses she ventures outside more often, has an old friend and love interest take her and her nurse out on the swamp in his boat, and eventually even goes to a town for a Fourth of July celebration. She was not really a part of her community; although some of this could be a function of the difficulties of living in a rural area without public transportation or access to other disability services.

The five films with a score of one were *The Sea Inside* and *Gattaca* (acquired disability from an accident), *Theory of Flight* and *Freak City* (disability from a degenerative disease ALS and multiple sclerosis), and *Oasis* (cerebral palsy present from birth). None of these films showed opportunities for postsecondary education, community employment, and independent or even semi-independent living. They depicted the main characters as shut-ins who rarely saw life outside their homes, or in the case of *Freak City* the care center. *Freak City* was given a rating of one because although the characters in this film did not have severely limiting disabilities, the audience is led to believe that the setting is permanent for all but a few residents. Independent living, employment, and educational opportunities were not discussed. None of the characters had family members or friends assisting them in the community. One scene shows the characters having a night out as a special reward. It was clear that the characters were not part of the community and that they were viewed as "those people" from the hospital. In *Theory of Flight*, the character only ventured into the community when the artist, who was sentenced to provide community service in the form of respite care, would take her for a few hours. In *The Sea Inside*, Ramon had not left his house in years and only did so for one court appearance to fight for ending his life. *Gattaca* portrayed a similar situation. The character was primarily seen in his apartment interacting only with his roommate (who was using his identity). He rarely went into the community, except an occasional trip to the pub. *Oasis* portrayed a girl who was not allowed into the community at all until she meets her "boyfriend" who takes her outside and to a family party. None of these movies depicted the characters participating in community activities, using public transportation, going to church, stores, libraries, etc.

These characters all stayed within the confines of their living spaces.

Within the *community integration* theme, many of the characters were portrayed as shut-ins, isolated from their communities, and more films scored a negative rating in this category than any other. However, a "positive" portrayal is not always the "best" portrayal. The manner in which community integration was depicted in these films did serve to address several important concerns such as lack of public transportation and services in rural areas, lack of accessible housing, and lack of integrated employment and postsecondary educational opportunities. While portraying characters as fully integrated members of society may be desirable in showing what "can be," the films instead focused on some very realistic and persistent barriers present in homes, educational institutions, workplaces, and communities in general.

### **Interpersonal Relationships**

The definition of interpersonal relationships used in evaluating films in this category is based on literature related to circle of friends/circle of support (Falvey et al., 1997). Table 2 delineates the scoring rubric for this category, and Table 3 lists individual scores for each movie ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). *Go Now* and *Monkey Shines* received a score of four in this category. *Go Now* portrayed the main character as having many positive interpersonal relationships. The first part of the film shows Nick's social life before the onset of his illness. He had many good friends and a serious girlfriend who remained in his life as his physical condition deteriorated. He had a full and stable circle of friends/natural supports. The final scene was Nick's wedding. This was the only film that portrayed an intimate relationship that endured. *Monkey Shines* also showed the character maintaining friendships that existed before his accident. He lost a girlfriend, but met a new love interest. The film also contained a fairly explicit sexual scene showing the character engaging in sexual activity with the aid of props (i.e., pulley system).

Nine films were given a rating of three: *My Left Foot*, *Door to Door*, and *Gaby* (lifetime disability), and *The Waterdance*, *Coming Home*, *The Sea Inside*, *Breaking the Waves*, *The Bone Collector*, and *Passion Fish* (acquired disability from an accident). Christy in *My Left Foot* has many nondisabled friends, but no intimate relationships. He was unsatisfied with the lack of intimacy in his life and wanted a close relationship with one particular woman. He became upset when he discovered she had a fiancé. At the end of the movie, he developed a friendship with a nurse. Although it was not shown in the movie, the afterword stated that Christy married this woman. Similarly, Bill Porter in *Door to Door*, had friends and acquaintances, but no intimate relationships. He cared deeply for his personal assistant who married and had children with another man. In *Gaby*, the char-

acter had sexual relationships (short-term, casual) and developed friendships with individuals with and without disabilities. But her caregiver was always there, limiting the closeness of these friends. There was not a network of natural supports in her life. Both Gaby and Bill Porter had many people in the acquaintances circle, and a close person in the caregiver role, but very few natural supports who would be considered close friends.

In *The Waterdance*, Joel had a sexual relationship with his married girlfriend despite the lack of privacy in the hospital. The other patients could hear what they were doing and hoped for similar relationships. Although Joel had an intimate relationship, no friends or acquaintances visited him. In contrast, Bloss, the biker, had several friends and a mother who visited frequently, but no intimate relationships. Therefore, none of the characters in this film had a complete circle of support. This movie did, however, show all the characters attending a workshop about sexuality for those with spinal cord injuries. In *Coming Home*, Luke had a sexual relationship with a married woman whose husband was in Vietnam. Luke had friendships with other individuals with disabilities, but no real friendships with nondisabled friends or family. The audience does not see a circle of natural supports in Luke's life. *The Sea Inside* is a true story about Ramon Sampedro who had close family ties and had developed close friendships with a few people in the "Right to Die" movement. He falls in love with and dreams about his attorney, Julie, who is married and also has a physical disability, but an intimate relationship does not develop. A local woman, Rosa, is infatuated with Ramon and visits him frequently trying to convince him that life is worth living. All of Ramon's relationships are with family or those involved in his quest to legally end his life. In *Breaking the Waves*, Jan, who was paralyzed by an accident, states his life is "finished" if he cannot make love to his wife, Bess. He convinces Bess to have sexual relations with other men and tell him about it so that he can experience intimacy. Jan does have a few good friends from the oil rig but no family support. Meanwhile, Bess loses her circle of support as she becomes enmeshed in Jan's fantasy. *The Bone Collector* portrayed Rhymes as having acquaintances from the police department, but no real close friends. He developed a relationship with the young detective he mentored, and the last scene showed them married and interacting with his family. The former soap opera actress, May-Alice, in *Passion Fish* alienates all visitors and caregivers by her bitterness. As the film progresses, however, she does accept visits from her actor friends, and an old high school friend who she finds attractive, but who is married with children. However, the film focuses primarily on the relationship developed by two mismatched people—May-Alice and her caregiver Chantelle. But once again, the character does not have a full circle of natural supports or an intimate relationship with an available partner.

Seven films received a score of two in this category: *Theory of Flight* and *Freak City* (degenerative disease); *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*, and *Million Dollar Baby* (acquired disability through an accident); and *Oasis* (lifelong disability). Jane, in *Theory of Flight* had no friends or acquaintances. The audience sees her only with her mother and respite caregiver. She craved a "normal" intimate relationship, which became the primary focus of the film and provided the setting for predicaments she encountered in "trying to get laid." In the end, she did have a sexual relationship with her caregiver after an unsuccessful attempt with a gigolo. In *Freak City* Ruth developed several friendships with the other residents but was not depicted as having any friends outside the care facility. Thus, there was not a circle of natural supports available to her. She did start to develop and intimate relationship with another resident, but it did not fully develop because he committed suicide.

Similar to *Breaking the Waves*, which received a rating of three, the next two films also contained a theme of "lost manhood." Ron Kovic, in *Born on the Fourth of July*, was not shown having intimate relationships aside from prostitutes. Ron Kovic felt he lost his masculinity when he became paralyzed. While he had friends who were also veterans with disabilities, the film does not show friendships with nondisabled peers. In *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* Ken had a very close live-in girlfriend who spent a lot of time with him in the hospital. As Ken learns he will no longer be able to sculpt, he ends the relationship by telling his girlfriend that she should find a "real man." He stated he could not bear to see her because it reminded him of all the things he could no longer do. The audience sees no other natural supports in Ken's life, he interacts only with hospital staff and his attorney after his girlfriend leaves.

*Million Dollar Baby* and *Oasis* both have family members using the character's disability to make money, while providing no emotional support. In *Million Dollar Baby*, Frankie, the character's trainer, provides the most support. Eddie, Frankie's partner at the gym, also provides friendship and support. Other than these two men, it appears she has no other friends/support network. The character in *Oasis* has no friends or acquaintances but has neighbors who look in on her occasionally. This isolation creates a scenario of desperation born from loneliness and she develops a relationship with a man who entered her apartment and raped her. The man, apparently with limited cognitive skills, becomes close with her and a budding relationship develops. He is the only person who really interacts with her.

Only one film received a score of one. The character in *Gattaca* apparently had no friends, family, or close acquaintances as evidenced by his being able to give his identity to another man and live in anonymity.

Overall, seven of the 18 films portrayed characters as having intimate sexual relationships (and two more alluded to marriage without showing intimacy). Ten of

the films showed the characters having friendships with nondisabled people other than their caregivers. This suggests some progress in the area of portraying people with physical disabilities as having friendships, casual intimate relationships, and long-term committed relationships.

### Stereotypes

The seven stereotypes identified (Nelson, 1994) were pitiable and pathetic; supercrip; sinister, evil, and criminal; better-off dead; maladjusted—own worst enemy; and burden to family/society. The films were rated according to whether the stereotype is present or absent in the film as outlined in the rubric (Table 4). Individual ratings of the movies are listed on Table 5.

### Unable to Live a Successful Life

The characters in nine of the 18 films reviewed were portrayed as "unable to live a successful life." In *Oasis*, the character was portrayed as a lonely, isolated individual incapable of working, socializing, or contributing to her community or family in any meaningful way. In *Freak City*, Ruth was sent to an institution against her will, although she was still able to care for herself with minor assistance, implying that she was not able to contribute or participate in community life because of her disability. Ruth's love interest also demonstrated "unable to live a successful life" by committing suicide upon being denied financial support for college. In *Theory of Flight*, Jane was similarly portrayed as unable to contribute or participate in community life unless her respite caregiver was by her side.

Five films, *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*, *The Sea Inside*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *Gattaca*, and *Passion Fish* portrayed characters who believed they were unable to live successful lives because they could no longer engage in their respective vocations. Except for Maggie in *Million Dollar Baby*, who was connected to life support in the hospital, all of the characters could have pursued other vocational interests. Jerome in *Gattaca* gave his identity to another man which sends the message that after losing the use of his legs, he could not live a successful life. His new "occupation," selling his identity, included elaborate preparations of blood, urine, and hair samples. Ramon, in *The Sea Inside*, had become a writer, but it appeared that if he could not be on the sea, his life was not "worthwhile" in his own eyes. In *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* others suggested options like writing and teaching, yet Ken felt his life was not worth living if he could not be a sculptor. The filmmakers did demonstrate some awareness that a successful life is possible in the supporting character's dialogue. But, ultimately the message was sent that the "meaningful" segment of Ken's life was over. In *Breaking the Waves*, Jan's inability to live a successful life was tied to role rather than vocation. He viewed not being able to make love to his wife as a failure in his role as husband and as a man. None of the nine films perpetuating this stereotype showed the

Table 5  
Summary Rating of Each Film by Stereotype (Listed in Order—Best to Worst)

| Movie                                         | Unable to live<br>a successful life | Maladjusted—own<br>worst enemy | Better-off<br>dead | Burden | Supercrip | Sinister, evil,<br>and criminal | Pitiable and<br>pathetic | Total |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|--------|-----------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|-------|
| Acquired disability from accident             |                                     |                                |                    |        |           |                                 |                          |       |
| Born on the<br>Fourth of July                 | —                                   | +                              | —                  | —      | —         | —                               | —                        | 1     |
| The Waterdance                                | —                                   | +                              | —                  | —      | —         | —                               | —                        | 1     |
| Coming Home                                   | —                                   | +                              | —                  | —      | —         | —                               | —                        | 1     |
| Bone Collector                                | —                                   | —                              | +                  | —      | —         | —                               | —                        | 1     |
| Passion Fish                                  | +                                   | +                              | —                  | —      | —         | —                               | —                        | 2     |
| Million Dollar<br>Baby                        | +                                   | —                              | +                  | —      | —         | —                               | —                        | 2     |
| Monkey Shines                                 | —                                   | +                              | +                  | —      | —         | +                               | —                        | 3     |
| Whose Life Is It<br>Anyway?                   | +                                   | +                              | +                  | —      | —         | —                               | —                        | 3     |
| Gattaca                                       | +                                   | +                              | +                  | —      | —         | —                               | —                        | 3     |
| Breaking the<br>Waves                         | +                                   | —                              | +                  | +      | —         | +                               | —                        | 4     |
| The Sea Inside                                | +                                   | —                              | +                  | +      | +         | —                               | —                        | 4     |
| Lifetime disability—present from birth        |                                     |                                |                    |        |           |                                 |                          |       |
| Door To Door                                  | —                                   | —                              | —                  | —      | +         | —                               | —                        | 1     |
| My Left Foot                                  | —                                   | +                              | —                  | —      | +         | —                               | —                        | 2     |
| Gaby                                          | —                                   | —                              | —                  | +      | +         | —                               | —                        | 2     |
| Oasis                                         | +                                   | —                              | —                  | +      | —         | —                               | +                        | 3     |
| Acquired disability from degenerative disease |                                     |                                |                    |        |           |                                 |                          |       |
| Go Now                                        | —                                   | +                              | —                  | —      | —         | —                               | —                        | 1     |
| Freak City                                    | +                                   | —                              | —                  | +      | —         | —                               | —                        | 2     |
| Theory of Flight                              | +                                   | —                              | —                  | +      | —         | —                               | —                        | 2     |
| Total                                         | 9                                   | 9                              | 7                  | 6      | 4         | 2                               | 1                        |       |

characters pursuing recreational or leisure interests, furthering the notion that a “successful” life is tied only to role and vocation, and not hobbies, interests, play activities, or relationships.

#### Maladjusted—Own Worst Enemy

Nine films perpetuated the stereotype of “mal-adjusted—own worst enemy” by portraying the character with a physical disability as being negative, bitter, prone to alcoholism, and/or engaging in self-destructive behaviors. Four films portrayed self-destruction in the form of alcohol abuse. Filmmakers led the audience to believe that the characters in *My Left Foot*, *Passion Fish*, *Gattaca*, and Raymond in *The Waterdance* drank excessively to escape the emotional pain that is an assumed corollary of disability. In defense of these movies, however, they did not perpetuate the stereotype of the benevolent able-bodied other who intercedes to convince the character of the error of his or her ways. In the other four films, the character was negative and self-destructive until finding a “cause” that changed his or her point of view. In *Theory of Flight* the “cause” was finding a sexual partner; in *Coming Home* and *Born on the Fourth of July* the “cause” was helping other veterans; and in *Freak City*, the “cause” was helping others in the institution realize their own worth.

#### Better-Off Dead

Seven films (all involving disability acquired through an accident) perpetuated this theme. Four films focused

on the right to die and assisted suicide, two contained suicide attempts, and another included a suicide. Two films had supporting characters with disabilities who commit suicide. The foci of both *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* and *The Sea Inside* were legal battles for the characters to be able end their own lives on their own terms. Despite the fact that many people in the characters’ lives tried to convince them otherwise, and assure them they could still have an enjoyable and productive life, both characters felt a loss of dignity and that they would be better off dead. *Million Dollar Baby* did not focus on a legal battle, but rather called attention to moral and ethical issues surrounding assisted suicide. Maggie demonstrated she felt she was better off dead and was under the watchful eye of hospital employees to prevent further suicide attempts. Rhymes, in *The Bone Collector*, had made arrangements with a doctor to “make the final transition on his own terms.” In *Gattaca*, Jerome had been living through Vincent, the man who assumed his identity. When Vincent finally left on a year-long mission, Jerome was no longer needed and killed himself in an incinerator. Jan, in *Breaking the Waves*, tries to commit suicide, as does the main character, Allen, in *Monkey Shines*. Allen’s doctor declares that he is clinically depressed and that 60% of quadriplegics attempt suicide. In both *Freak City* and *The Waterdance* a supporting character does commit suicide. This common theme of suicide suggests that filmmakers continue to perpetuate the “better off dead” stereotype.

### Burden

Six films perpetuated the stereotype of being a "burden." In *Gaby* and *Theory of Flight* the families hired a caregiver, because the disability was too much for them to handle alone. Gaby's nurse provided constant care from childhood into adulthood, sacrificing a social life of her own, implying that such care is a burdensome, self-less, committed endeavor. In *Theory of Flight*, the entire story was based on the mother's need for respite care and an artist who was providing such care as a condition of his community service requirements. In *Oasis*, the brother had neighbors look in on Gong-ju, while he accepted money for her care. He put up appearances when social workers visited, but made it clear he was far too busy to actually care for her. In *Freak City*, Ruth's sister had her committed to a care home after their mother died, suggesting that caring for Ruth would be far too burdensome for the sister. In *The Sea Inside* and *Breaking the Waves*, care for the character dominated the lives of the families. Ramon's (*The Sea Inside*) wish to die was a source of contention within the family, especially with his brother who felt Ramon was ungrateful for sacrifices made by the family and the care given for 27 years. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb, <http://www.imdb.com>) describes an outstanding supporting character as the "unselfish, undemanding, loving sister-in-law." Bess, in *Breaking the Waves*, whose mental health was already fragile, lost touch with reality as a result of caring for Jan. As opposed to the five previously described movies, Bess's burden was psychological, not physical, resulting from guilt and obligation to cure him.

### Supercrip

Four biographical films contained the "supercrip" stereotype of one who overcomes obstacles and becomes an inspiration to others. While it may be argued that a true story does not perpetuate stereotypes, we believe that the focus of the characters' lives as "inspirational" and "full of great accomplishments" perpetuates images of the "supercrip." The focus on Christy's (*My Left Foot*) "overcoming" his severe physical disability to become a successful painter, writer, and poet is an illustration of a "mythic ideal of courage in the face of what is considered a tragedy" (Darke, 1999) and triumph over the odds (Harnett, 2000; Roper, n.d.). For example, a review in the IMDb states, "this biography of Christy Brown ... who overcame grievous physical impediments to achieve fame as an artist and writer. As the victim of cerebral palsy whose eyes shine bright with burning emotions and whose foot becomes the instrument to express those emotions ... [this movie] is a testament to the belief that individual creativity need not be diminished by one's physical challenges" ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com), italics added). *Door to Door* shows Bill stubbornly refusing to accept "no" as an answer when he applies for a job in sales. He eventually becomes salesperson of the year and is

described as "a popular symbol of optimistic determination" (<http://www.who2.com/billporter.html>). *Gaby* also overcame the perceived limitations of her disability and passed the entrance exam to attend regular high school. She continued with her education and became the first person with a significant disability to attend college in Mexico City. And finally, Ramon Sampedro (*The Sea Inside*), who learned to write with his mouth, is described as "inspirational" in several Internet descriptions of the film (<http://movies.about.com/od/theseinside>).

### Sinister, Evil, and Criminal and Pitiable and Pathetic

The two stereotypes perpetuated the least often were "sinister, evil, and criminal" (two films—*Breaking the Waves* and *Monkey Shines*) and "pitiable and pathetic" (one film—*Oasis*). The "sinister, evil, and criminal" stereotype was present in two films—*Breaking the Waves* and *Monkey Shines*. While Jan was not criminal, he did inflict control over his wife by manipulating her to fulfill his erotic fantasies (i.e., having sex with other men and telling him about it). As a result, Bess is brutally beaten and dies, while Jan is able to leave the hospital and walk with the use of a cane. In *Monkey Shines*, the character is not personally criminal, but the monkey who enacts his thoughts commits arson, assault, and murder.

And finally, *Oasis* perpetuated the "pitiable and pathetic" stereotype as illustrated by the following example, "Moon So-ri's performance as Gong-ju is nothing short of astonishing. She goes through contortions to make us aware of the agony of her illness.... Her movements are spasmodic and uncoordinated and she appears to be in constant pain but there is a kindness in her face that allows us to see the person behind the pain" ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com), italics added). While the characters in *Monkey Shines* and the *Bone Collector* were not rated as pitiable and pathetic, the filmmakers used disability to heighten tension when the characters, vulnerable and unable to escape the villain, await an able bodied person to arrive and save the day.

## Discussion

If an issue doesn't appear in print, on television, or in the movies to most people it doesn't exist  
(Carter-Long, 2005, p. 1).

Because what is viewed in the media, and specifically in film, appears to have an impact on public perceptions of disability, it is important to consider whether negative themes and stereotypes identified in the research literature continue to be perpetuated. In a study using a national sample of over 1200 adults, Farnall and Smith (1999) found that adults who watched positive portrayals of characters with disabilities were more likely to recognize discrimination against people with disabilities and less likely to say they had negative emotions when

encountering people with disabilities. Viewing *My Left Foot* was significantly related to perceiving discrimination in equal opportunity and education, and viewing *Born on the Fourth of July* was related to perceiving discrimination in access to public events. In the same study, personal contact was related to decreased negative emotions, but not to perceiving discrimination; indicating that media portrayals appear to be a viable means of communicating messages about discrimination and equal opportunity.

### *Trends Over Time*

Norden (1994) identified three historical eras in filmmaking and disabilities, including the birth of the filmmaking industry through the late 1930s, the World War II years until the 1970s, and the 1970s through the end of the century. Films from the first period (through the 1930s) tended to be highly exploitative with the characters being nothing more than comic figures, beasts, or objects of pity (i.e., a victim). Films from the second period (WWII until the 1970s) had a more exploratory quality where the character's struggles to overcome adversity were the main focus (i.e., a victor). The third time period (1970s until present) dealt with disability in a more incidental way. There was more focus on fighting for social justice, sexually expressing oneself, and dealing with everyday life. Despite that fact that there are films that revert back to previous periods, Norden found that a general movement from exploitative to exploratory to incidental does suggest a slow movement toward a more enlightened view of physical disability.

Our findings support Norden's (1994) assertion and extend the review into the 21st Century. The current study indicated that progress has been made with respect to no longer portraying characters with physical disabilities as comic figures or beasts; but the theme of pity is still present. While three films had poignant scenes with the main character speaking out against being pitied or treated differently (*Door to Door*, *Go Now*, and *My Left Foot*); one film (*Oasis*) did portray the character as a pitiable and pathetic victim. However, the most common way pity was manifest was in the main character fighting against the "pitiers." The pitiers (supporting cast members) frequently talked about the "bravery" of the character with a disability or how they personally could not handle such a situation. In response, the character with a disability would become angry, surly, and ill-mannered. The character was then portrayed as engaging in some kind of self-destructive behavior, usually excessive drinking (*My Left Foot*, *Passion Fish*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Gattaca*, and *The Waterdance*). Therefore, while filmmakers are no longer portraying characters as pitiable and pathetic non-persons, the theme of pity is continued by stereotypical portrayals of self-pity and self-destructive behaviors. Another way this theme of anger and self-pity was evident was by the character rejecting help from caregivers

and becoming a "bad" patient (*Passion Fish*, *Coming Home*, and *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*) who is offensive, discourteous and rude to others.

We also found evidence of themes from Norden's (1994) second era where overcoming adversity was the main focus. The individual with a disability as a victorious "supercrip" is still perpetuated in films such as *Door to Door*, *My Left Foot*, and *Gaby*. In discussing the increase in characters with disabilities in literature, plays, and movies, Zola (1982) stated that unfortunately the message in far too many of these stories is that of superhuman heroism and courage, with the storyline focusing on some great obstacle the person overcame or special goal achieved. "These stories bring up in me, and I think in my fellow 'crips,' some of the same isolation we feel in the TV telethons where money is raised for 'those poor unfortunates'" (p. 11). Longmore (1987) explained that a primary reason for the popularity of films like these is that they are "feel good" movies in which the audience views a "successful" person with a disability who can serve as a model of personal adjustment, striving, and achievement. If characters in the films can "overcome their adversities," then of course the viewer, who is not facing such obstacles, can do the same. Unfortunately, most movies of characters with disabilities do not depict society as needing to change with respect to stigma and social discrimination; but rather disability is portrayed as an individual characteristic that can serve to build character. Therefore, audience members are blameless as to their role in perpetuating discrimination and oppression of individuals with disabilities.

Within this theme of "overcoming adversity" many films are still depicting characters with disabilities as maladjusted and in need of psychological insight from those without disabilities (Nelson, 1994), automatically constructing the spectator as able-bodied (Harnett, 2000). The focus then shifts to the benevolent people in the character's life, making charity the heart of the story rather than barriers created by many of these benefactors and society that promote an "us" versus "them" view of disability (Elliott, 1994).

Portraying individuals with disabilities as unable to lead successful lives as well as the idea that the individual is better off dead was also disturbingly common. Eight of the 18 films contained attempted, successful, or assisted suicide (in one film it was a supporting character, in the other seven films it was a lead actor/actress). The right to die was a major plot line in four of these films. We believe (although we have no data to support this assertion) this percentage is much greater than in films with main characters without disabilities. This sends a very strong message that life with a disability is a life of suffering, deprivation, and unfulfilled dreams. In addition, individuals with disabilities are still being shown as being a burden to others. Disability is rarely depicted as part of the natural variation in the human condition.

Consistent with Norden's (1994) findings of the third era there appears to be progress in the area of portraying individuals with disabilities as sexual beings. In 1977, Biklen and Bogdan stated that the portrayal of individuals as either asexual or dangerous sexual monsters was a common stereotype in the media. We did not find this to be the case. Several of the films showed the characters engaging in sexual relationships. *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Theory of Flight*, and *Coming Home* depicted prostitution as the only viable option for sexual relationships. However, *Coming Home* and *Theory of Flight* resolved this issue when someone in a caregiver role became an intimate partner. Two films (*Coming Home* and *The Waterdance*) showed the character having an ongoing sexual relationship with a married woman. While this situation portrays the character as a sexual being, it does not send the message that the character was a viable candidate for a long-term monogamous, sexual relationship with a nondisabled partner. While important issues such as loss of privacy and loss of "manhood" were brought to light in movies such as *Born on the Fourth of July*, *The Waterdance*, *Breaking the Waves*, *The Sea Inside*, and *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*, none of the films actually portrayed a character with an existing physical disability meeting and asking someone for a date and developing a relationship. On the other hand, three films were quite positive in portraying sexuality. *Go Now* showed a long-term committed relationship that endured through the progression of the disability. And both *The Bone Collector* and *Monkey Shines* showed a romantic relationship developing with a work associate.

Another aspect of Norden's third era, portraying disability in an incidental way, was evident in several of the films we reviewed. Several characters had personalities that were not overshadowed by disability. This was particularly evident in *Door to Door*, *Go Now*, and *The Waterdance*. Perhaps the personalities of these characters were portrayed more thoroughly because none had speech difficulties, and it was easier to show what was going on in the minds of the characters. Overall, we believe that filmmakers are making efforts to (a) portray characters with disabilities as having more "depth," (b) demonstrate heightened awareness of the internal feelings, motivations, and desires of individuals with disabilities, and (c) show that the "human qualities" of individuals with disabilities are not very different from those of the general viewing audience.

### **Areas of Concern**

It seemed as though there was a dichotomy with respect to community integration. The films we reviewed had either good or poor depictions. The movies based on true stories did a much better job of showing community integration than did the fictitious films. This was especially interesting in *My Left Foot* and *Gaby*, which highlighted lives of characters living in the 1950s and 1960s. In many of the fictional films, the characters

were not integrated into the community in education, employment, independent living, or social/community functions. Feature films continue to fall short in the portrayal of community integration, postsecondary opportunities, and competitive employment. It appears that filmmakers are only beginning to understand the social and daily living concerns of individuals with physical disabilities and are still not promoting the movement toward vocational and educational opportunities. They are not depicting characters with disabilities as workers, going to the bank, shopping at a grocery store, or any other relatively mundane, day-to-day tasks.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations in the present study. First, we only chose films that were easily accessible to the general public. Movies that were available through university libraries, but not through popular outlets such as Blockbuster, Netflix, or other movie rental establishments were not included. We also did not include documentaries that may provide a very different and more realistic view of physical disability. The films we reviewed were produced for profit, with big-name actors, and probably focused more on what would sell, than what would change public opinion.

Second, we only reviewed 18 films. This is a very small cross-section of all the films produced during the 30-year time frame. However, these were the only films we found that met the selection criteria. Third, we only reviewed films that included a main character with a physical disability. Other films with minor characters or other disabilities may be sending different messages from the films in our sample. Fourth, several of our films were about real people. One could argue that these depictions were "true to life" and should not be rated according to stereotypes. However, aspects of these individual's lives that filmmakers choose to portray are very telling. "Stories of the disabled, stories of people's bodies or minds going wrong, make compelling tales" (Davis, 1997, p. 65). Everyone's life is filled with numerous events. The events chosen for portrayal on the big screen determines the message sent. Therefore, choosing to portray aspects of one's life such as being a burden to others or being one's own worst enemy definitely has the power to perpetuate negative stereotypes. The same events, or different events, if framed differently would send a very different message.

Fifth, much of the previous research reporting stereotypes was based on a combination of disabilities, as opposed to physical disability only. Perhaps some of the stereotypes in the research literature are more prevalent for psychiatric disabilities or developmental delay than for physical disabilities. However, all of the seven stereotypes identified by Nelson (1994) were perpetuated in one or more of the films we reviewed; thus, indicating these stereotypes are present in films of individuals with physical disabilities.

Finally, our own biases most certainly affect the ratings given to the films. The scenes we chose to focus on and remember were greatly influenced by our individual experiences. Neither of us have a physical disability as defined in the selection criteria. Individuals with disabilities, other scholars, or the public in general may not view the films in the same way that we did. We did acknowledge this in discussing the films and coming to consensus on the ratings. However, different people may come to very different conclusions than we did when watching the same films.

### *Suggestions for Future Research and Practice*

We believe the next steps in this line of research would be to interview individuals with disabilities regarding their perceptions as to the accuracy and reality of current portrayals of people with physical disabilities in film. It would also be important to study the perceptions of the general population of moviegoers. How do the images actually affect perceptions, and then community action? Finally, it would be interesting to compare films with disabilities to films with characters without disabilities. For example, how many films portray male characters without disabilities as only having sexual relationships with prostitutes or married women? And how many films of nondisabled characters focus primarily on themes of overcoming adversity, being one's own worst enemy, or having a life not worth living? A comparison of this nature would add light to the current analysis.

Overall, media are making progress away from ableist images (Bogdan & Biklen, 1977) in the portrayal of individuals with disabilities in feature films. However, there are many areas in need of improvement. More actors with disabilities should be employed to play major parts. The films we reviewed employed famous actors and actresses, an obvious box office draw. In one sense, if the movie has a positive portrayal of a character with a disability, the increased viewing audience provided by a big-name star could help increase public awareness. On the other hand, what message is being sent if audiences never see actors with disabilities? In addition, what message is being sent when these same actors win Academy Awards because they were able to portray a character "so different" from themselves? (Nelson, 1994).

More films should have "extras" with disabilities in background scenes that would show natural community presence. Donaldson (1981) reported that of the thousands of people in background scenes in 85 television programs, none had visible disabilities. People with disabilities were invisible in groups of shoppers, spectators, jurors, customers, or workers. We found the same to be true 20 years later. Characters and actors with physical disabilities appeared as extras in the movies we reviewed, but only in scenes at hospitals or rehabilitation centers. People with physical disabilities were noticeably absent from scenes in the community such

as another diner, or shopper, or even as a passer-by, confirming the assertion of Harnett (2000) that people with disabilities remain virtually unseen as incidental characters in the community or in secondary roles of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, or friends.

And finally, more films should portray individuals with disabilities as having "typical" emotions, routines, interpersonal conflicts, and in general have plot lines more similar to those in films featuring main characters without disabilities. Films including a character with a disability should not focus on the valiant struggle against the odds, where the disability is the central focus of a person's life. Instead, we would recommend that feature films portray a person with a disability living a full and rich life where the disability is incidental to the character's role. We might suggest something akin to an attorney in a wheelchair, who falls in love and has an intimate relationship that has its ups and downs, who has disagreements as well as friendships with co-workers, who is neither a superhero nor a failure, but who lives life unremarkably like most people we meet every day.

The media can play an active role in challenging society's fear and misunderstanding of disability by consciously seeking to portray characters with disabilities realistically, fairly, and frequently. Providing realistic portrayals of disability will help in both the construction of a healthy self-image for [people with disabilities] and a more informed image for those who never come in close personal contact with [people with disabilities] (Harnett, 2000, p. 28).

### **References**

- American Heritage Dictionary. (2000). *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition*. Retrieved November 16, 2006, from <http://www.bartleby.com/61/77/A0017750.html>.
- Biklen, D., & Bogdan, R. (1977). Media portrayals of disabled people: A study in stereotypes. *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, 8, 4-9.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, D. (1977). Handicapism. *Social Policy*, 7, 14-19.
- Bogdan, R., Biklen, D., Shapiro, A., & Spelkoman, D. (1982). The disabled: Media's monster. *Social Policy*, 13, 32-35.
- Byrd, E. K. (1989). A study of film depiction of specific characteristics of characters with disability in film. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 20, 43-44.
- Byrd, E. K., & Elliot, T. R. (1985). Feature films and disability: A descriptive study. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 30, 47-51.
- Byrd, E. K., & Elliot, T. R. (1988). Disability in feature length films: Frequency and quality of films over an 11-year span. *International Journal of Rehabilitation Research*, 11, 143-148.
- Byrd, E. K., & Pipes, R. B. (1981). Feature films and disability. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 47, 51-53.
- Carter-Long, L. (2005, December 13). The politics of popcorn. *Ragged Edge Online*. Retrieved February 18, 2006, from <http://www.raggededgemagazine.com/departments/mediacircusblog/000673.html>.
- Darke, P. A. (1999). *The Cinematic Construction of Physical Disability as Identified Through the Application of the Social Model of Disability to Six Indicative Films Made Since 1970*.

- PhD dissertation. Retrieved on February 18, 2006, from <http://www.outside-centre.com/darke/paulphd/content.htm>.
- Davis, L. J. (1997). Nude Venuses, Medusa's body, and phantom limbs. In D. T. Mitchell & S. L. Snyder (Eds.), *The body and physical difference* (pp. 51–70). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.
- Donaldson, J. (1981). The visibility and image of handicapped people on television. *Exceptional Children*, 47, 413–416.
- Elliott, D. (1994). Disability and the media: The ethics of the matter. In J. A. Nelson (Ed.), *The disabled, the media, and the information age* (pp. 73–79). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Falvey, M. A., Forest, M., Pearpoint, J., & Rosenberg, R. L. (1997). *All my life's a circle. Using the tools: Circles, MAPS & PATHS*. Toronto: Inclusion Press.
- Farnall, O., & Smith, K. A. (1999). Reactions to people with disabilities: Personal contact versus viewing of specific media portrayals. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 76, 659–673.
- Harnett, A. (2000). Escaping the "evil avenger" and the "supercrip": Images of disability in popular television. *Irish Communications Review*, 8, 21–29.
- Keough, T. (n.d.). Review of the waterdance. Retrieved on November 1, 2004, from <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/B00005RDRI/103-2271193-4319813?v=glance>.
- Kunc, N. (n.d.). *The Right to be Disabled*. Retrieved November 1, 2004, from <http://www.normemma.com/prntindx.htm#Right%20To%20Be%20Disabled>.
- Lawson, A., & Fouts, G. (2004). Mental illness in Disney animated films. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 49, 310–314.
- Longmore, P. K. (1985). Screening stereotypes: Images of disabled people. *Social Policy*, 16, 31–37.
- Longmore, P. K. (1987). Screening stereotypes: Images of disabled people in television and motion pictures. In A. Gartner & T. Joe (Eds.), *Images of the disabled, disabling images* (pp. 65–78). New York: Praeger Publishers.
- McNeil, J. M. (1997, August). Current populations reports. *Americans with Disabilities: 1994–95*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved December 1, 2006, from <http://www.census.gov/prod/3/97pubs/p70-61.pdf>.
- Nelson, J. A. (1994). Broken images: Portrayals of those with disabilities in American media. In J. A. Nelson (Ed.), *The disabled, the media, and the information age* (pp. 1–24). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Norden, M. F. (1994). *The cinema of isolation: A history of physical disability in the movies*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Roper, L. (n.d.). *Disability in Media*. Retrieved February 18, 2006, from [http://www.mediaed.org.uk/posted\\_documents/DisabilityinMedia.htm](http://www.mediaed.org.uk/posted_documents/DisabilityinMedia.htm).
- Safran, S. P. (1998a). Disability portrayal in film: Reflecting the past, directing the future. *Exceptional Children*, 64, 227–238.
- Safran, S. P. (1998b). The first century of disability portrayal in film: An analysis of the literature. *Journal of Special Education*, 31, 467–479.
- Safran, S. P. (2001). Movie images of disability and war: Framing history and political ideology. *Remedial and Special Education*, 22, 223–232.
- Shapiro, J. P. (1994). *No pity*. New York: Random House.
- Susman, J. (1994). Disability, stigma and deviance. *Social Science and Medicine*, 38, 15–22.
- Zola, I. K. (1982). Introduction. In I. K. Zola (Ed.), *Ordinary lives: Voices of disability and disease* (pp. 11–14). Cambridge: Applewood Books.

Received: May 16, 2006

Final Acceptance: October 14, 2006

Editor in Charge: Donna Lehr

Copyright of Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities is the property of TASH and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.