

The Good and the Bad: Autism Representation in Mass Media

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The Good and the Bad: Autism Representation in Mass Media

Introduction

“Disability is an alien culture whose inhabitants are becoming increasingly visible in the host culture” (MacDonald, 2013, p.60).

This epigraph invites one to reflect on a society’s culture while becoming aware that in some communities, disabilities may be ignored in daily life. Culture can be fluidly defined, since there is no one concrete definition (Browne, 2006). Regardless of this fluidity, culture universally influences the person’s identity, attitudes and the roles taken within a community (Barnes, 2008). Culture is also embodied by different forms of expressions that are divided into the elite culture (that includes theatre, classical music, novels amongst others) and the popular/mass culture (that includes magazines, newspaper and television) (Barnes, 2008; Jenkins, 2013). Given that culture dominates our lives, it is important to see the whole extent to which society’s culture and its cultural products affect disabled people’s lives.

When linking culture with disability one can note how in Western cultures, the medical model is predominantly used, where disabled people are provided therapy to ‘cure’ their ‘individualised problem’ (Gough, 2005). Consequently, disabled people often find it difficult to make their personal narratives heard, where their experiences and views are reduced to the process of eliciting information for professionals to determine the possible treatment (Fisher & Goodley, 2007). The medical model has also led disabled people to be perceived as having no power in the formation of society’s cultural attitudes and values (Devenney, 2004). However, all

this was challenged in the 1970s with the emergence of the social model, where disabled people started exploring the extent to which social and cultural beliefs shaped their disability (Baldwin, Faulkner & Hecht, 2008). Different disabled activists also created the disability culture and art movement to express their thoughts, through artistic creations that challenge the dominant medicalised view of disability (Barnes, 2008; Stöck, 2014). Unfortunately, being a minority group may have led disabled people to be misrepresented in culture (Lauzen, Dozier & Horan, 2008). To see whether this statement still holds in our present society, one needs to take a look at how disability is being depicted in the cultural products available to us.

As a speech language pathologist, I work a lot with children and young adults with autism. Throughout my years of working, I have realised that despite the attempts made by disabled people to move away from the medical model, society's extensive focus is still on the 'symptoms'. This may lead some professionals to ignore the fact that people with autism are individuals with their views. Such realisation has heightened my interest in exploring how autism is culturally portrayed in the media. I am also interested in looking at autism as there is a wide array of films and series that introduce the public to autism, while also classifying as one of the top disabilities portrayed in mass media (Rimmerman, 2013). In view of the wide availability of films and series that portray autism, the cultural products that will be included throughout this discussion are all mass culture.

The mass cultural products that were chosen for this discussion were films, series, online videos and online blogs as they often reach a wide range of populations (Wilde, 2007). People also learn about society's norms and what is considered as 'deviant' through such products (Ellis

& Goggin, 2015; Ellis, 2016). Furthermore, the next section will focus on fictional tele-series and films. Fictional cultural products play a crucial role as they can reinforce or challenge the attitudes and myths surrounding particular disabilities present within society through their storyline or characters (Ellis, 2006). If such cultural products encourage people including disabled people to identify with the characters within the storyline then they are possibly helping them to feel more understood by their society (Barnes 2012). However, before looking at autism in such cultural products, it is important to first comprehend the dominant discourse surrounding autism.

Autism and Culture

Autism has dominantly been defined through the medical lens, where different societies have commonly described individuals diagnosed with autism as having difficulties in social communication, interaction and imagination (Mac Carthaigh, 2019). Persons diagnosed with autism may also be viewed as experiencing difficulties in emotional intelligence (Rajendran & Mitchell, 2007). Such negative medical descriptions have also led society to culturally stereotype people diagnosed with autism as being innocent, childlike, unable to achieve autonomy and express affection towards someone (Jennings, 2020).

Through reflecting on such medicalised view of autism, I also recall how, as a student speech-language pathologist, I was taught that autism can be divided into high and low functioning. In this binary division, children diagnosed with low functioning autism are described as having rigid repetitive behaviours accompanied by severe communication difficulties (Sung, Bosley, Fisher & Gordon, 2014). Contrastingly, children diagnosed with high functioning autism

are stereotyped as being intelligent with some pragmatic difficulties (Sung et al., 2014). Savant skills are also one of the symptoms outlined in medical documents such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental disorder (DSM), where some people with autism are described as having above 'normal' intelligence on a topic (Lai, Lombardo, Chakrabarti & Baron-Cohen, 2013). Such medical documents may lead society to embrace the stereotype that some persons with autism are geniuses.

Having outlined this medicalised view, it is important to point out that with the emergence of organisations *of* rather than *for* autism, a cultural shift started appearing, where members within organisations of autism are advocating for neurodiversity to be accepted (Raz et al., 2018). Richards (2016), an adult with autism, also outlines that autism is a diverse way of living and not a disorder. Following this argument, the term autistic people, rather than people with autism spectrum disorder, will be used throughout this discussion. Additionally, autism self-advocacy networks argue that referring to an individual as an autistic person has more linguistic power, as it shows that it is an integral part of the person's identity (Brown, 2011; Brownlow, 2010; Sinclair, 2005). Such terminology agrees with the arguments brought forward by the social model, where it shows that disability is created externally by society's inability to cater for different needs (Smith, 2010).

As previously discussed, series and films usually serve as a medium to portray disability (Ellis & Goggin, 2015). This leads me to wonder if such cultural products are reinforcing or challenging the stereotypes linked with autism.

Portrayal of Autism in Films and Series

In 1988 the world was introduced to the life of Raymond Babbitt a man diagnosed with autism in the film *Rain man* (Levinson, 1988). After living in an institution for several years Raymond returns to live in Cincinnati with his brother Charlie Babbitt who takes him home after discovering that his late father left three million dollars to his brother. Throughout the film, Raymond is portrayed as having difficulties in expressing emotions, adhere to rigid routines and has the savant ability to mentally calculate hundreds of objects. For instance, this ability is used by his brother Charlie in the casino scene to win a large sum of money and pay his debts.

To discuss this film, I have adopted Mitchell and Synder's (2000) narrative prosthesis theory that argues that disability may be used as a symbolic figure to metaphorically represent something else, including the good in others. Disability has also been used in narratives as a tool to create drama (Conn & Bhugra, 2012). In this case, Raymond's autism contributes in making his brother a better person where at the end of the film, Charlie no longer wants to 'take care' of Raymond to have access to his inherited money. This may have led Raymond's character to unrealistically portray the challenges that autistic people face, where he is seen as experiencing tantrums that stop when routines are adhered to, while easily adjusting to his new life outside the residential home making it easier for Charlie to adapt to his brother's needs (McCarthy, 2018; Murray, 2016).

Unfortunately, as Knights (2018) argues, 30 years later autistic people like himself are still being perceived as socially naïve or as having 'special abilities' like Raymond Babbitt. He also points out that some recent series still support this old myth, where autistic characters like Shaun

Murphy (played by Freddie Highmore) in *The Good Doctor* are portrayed as exceptional geniuses (Dae Kim, 2017-2019). Thus, although *Rain Man* might have successfully increased the world's awareness about autism, this film is still being used by society to reinforce the medical model. However, according to Skudra (2018), it is not the film that should be blamed for society's rigidity to change but the wider production industries which have failed to include a more realistic portrayal of autism. Thus, I feel that it is important to take a look at more recent productions.

Keir Gilchrist had the opportunity to act as the high school senior Sam Gardner in *Atypical*, an adolescent diagnosed with 'high functioning' autism (Rashid, Gordon & Rohlich, 2017-2019). From the beginning of the series, Sam is observed trying to engage in 'typical' adolescents' activities, where he is interested in dating and also works at a technology store. Additionally, in season 1, episode 6 Sam Gardner says:

Autism isn't an accomplishment. It's something I was born with. You wouldn't write an essay about having ten fingers and ten toes, would you? ... people think autistic people don't have empathy, but that's not true. Sometimes I can't tell if someone's upset, but once I know, I feel lots of empathy (Rashid et al., 2017).

Through these words Sam is discarding the dominant stereotypes that all autistic people have difficulties in understanding, expressing and acting upon their own and others' emotions (Jones & Harwood, 2009). Sam's argument also agrees with Foucault's (1995) discussion that the representations that society creates through its' dominant discourses may not necessarily be the true representations of that particular group. In this case, *Atypical* moves away from the

dominant belief that all autistic people are unable to voice their views as seen in *Rain Man* (Green, 2018). Moreover, from a narrative prosthesis point of view, *Atypical* does not metaphorically use autism as a tool to bring out others' inherent goodness but focuses on exploring disability from the social dimension (Mitchell & Synder, 2000). This can be seen throughout the series, since although Sam is an intelligent adolescent, he still experiences difficulties in understanding his 'friend's' humour, while at times getting in serious trouble for speaking in an unfiltered, honest manner. Consequently, including such features in the storyline's narrative allows the viewers to explore disability from a social dimension, where it makes them comfortable in getting to know Sam and the challenges he may face across different social environments (Wollaston, 2017; The Commentator, 2017). This narrative also challenges the dominant view that all autistic individuals are unable to participate in everyday activities, where Sam is observed participating in class and at his place of work.

Although such positive reviews indicate that *Atypical* has been accepted by the general public, Singer (2017) the president of the Autism Science Foundation argues that Sam Gardner only provides an overly positive image. She also outlines that it is very disappointing that Sam is never portrayed attending some special education classrooms and that the adaptations needed for him appeared to be readily provided. This argument is also supported by Jones (2019) an autistic adolescent who argues that unlike Sam, she was asked to leave many classes and other public spaces due to her neurodiverse behaviour. Moreover, she felt disappointed that autistic people were not involved in the planning of such cultural products.

Contrastingly, Asher (2016) the director of the American film *A boy called Po* worked in collaboration with the Activate4Autism movement to produce a realistic narrative about Po, a young autistic boy who lived with his widowed father. Throughout the film, Po was seen being continuously bullied by his peers at school. Lack of support from Po's teacher was also noted, where in the film she was seen discussing with his father the possibility of sending his child to a special centre to 'treat' his autism. Furthermore, the hardships faced throughout the film have led Julian Feder, the artist who played Po, to admit that acting this role made him aware of the challenges that autistic people faced (Simmons, 2017). He also realised that lack of support from the educational sector may lead other autistic children to be increasingly segregated at school. However, even though this film realistically portrayed the challenges that autistic children face in a non-inclusive environment, Po's autism was unfortunately metaphorically used as a tool for his father to find love again, where he fell in love with his son's therapist (Mitchell & Synder, 2000).

As a result, through analysing the cultural products outlined above, one may realise that some executive producers and directors are moving away from the dominant medicalised images usually associated with autism. However, I agree with Skudura's (2018) aforementioned statement as there is still this a pressing need for the active participation of autistic individuals in the execution of storylines to ensure a more realistic portrayal of their lives. Moreover, the film *A Boy called Po* also shows that society's focus to 'normalise' autism may lead autistic children to stand out as 'being different', making them more susceptible to bullying (Goodley, Runswick-Cole

& Liddiard, 2016). Thus, it is important to look at whether there are any media products that educate children on inclusion.

Children's Media

Children's attitudes toward disability develop through several influencing factors including society's cultural values, family and religious beliefs (Dyson, 2005). Television is one of the primary sources of media that allows children to familiarise themselves with different cultural information (Van Evra, 2004). Subsequently, the way disability is portrayed in cultural products targeting children as their audience can impact how children interact with disabled people (Bond, 2013).

The two mass cultural products that will be discussed for this section are *Loop* and *Sesame Street* (Milsom, 2020; Scarborough, 2017). These two cultural products were specifically chosen over other children's media as they both portray two female characters diagnosed with autism, Renee in *Loop* and Julia in *Sesame Street*. This is important to highlight as autism has largely been linked with boys, where the ratio of three boys per one girl has been circulating in the medical field (Tromans & Adams, 2018; Werling & Geschwin, 2013). Moreover, most cultural products include male autistic characters, thus the inclusion of female autistic characters may help in discarding such ratios, while also helping autistic girls and women feel less alienated from society (Ejaz, 2020; Tharian, Henderson, Wathanasin, Hayden, Chester & Tromans, 2019).

In the episode 'Meet Julia' in *Sesame Street*, Julia is introduced to its international audience as a person who sometimes does things in her own unique way (Scarborough, 2017).

Resmotvits (2015) outlines that the focus on uniqueness has originated from closely collaborating with the Autism Self-Advocacy Network which advocates that autism is a diverse way of expressing self. Furthermore, Julia is also portrayed as having genuine friends who are willing to use different strategies to adapt to her communication skills (Scarborough, 2017). For instance, in this episode *'Meet Julia'* Elmo and Abby Cadabby explain to Big Bird that Julia did not respond to his greetings due to some processing difficulties. Another example is the episode *'Peek-a-boo with Elmo and Julia'* where Elmo is seen waiting for Julia to respond to his attempt to play peek-a-boo before starting the game (Scarborough, 2017). In response to such episodes, Malia (2019) a parent of an autistic child comments that Sesame Street's initiative to teach inclusive strategies to children gives her hope that her child's current and future peers may develop into supportive adults. Subsequently, Julia does not solely represent disabled children but also teaches that differences should be embraced and accommodated for (Rowe, 2019).

Similarly, in the recent animated movie *Loop* produced by Disney-Pixar in close collaboration with the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, the talkative Marcus is paired with Renee, an autistic non-verbal girl, on a canoeing trip (Milsom, 2020). This short film beautifully shows how Marcus tries to establish a positive friendly relationship by adapting to Renee's communication techniques while accepting her attempts to express her wants through pictures on her mobile. He also uses her favourite sound of the barking dog to calm her down and to express affection towards her. Consequently, this animated movie adapted the social model approach, where it was the environment that adapted to Renee's needs making her feel accepted.

This film was given a positive review by the general public, who complemented Disney-Pixar for realistically showing the doubts that 'neurotypical' children face when getting to know someone with autism, while also allowing them to see and hear what Renee is experiencing when she gets overstimulated by the echoes in the cave (Reif, 2019). When looking at reaction by the autistic community, Sinclair (2020) an autistic blogger also complements this film for opening a new era for animation, where autism is not used as a tool to make the story interesting but is seen as a story in itself.

Lastly, in a YouTube video the director Erica Milsom also explained how for the very first time in animation movies, they employed Madison Bandy, a non-verbal autistic artist, as the voice of Renee (Pixar Central, 2020). The fact that the director saw the importance of actually employing an autistic artist for the part of Renee heightened my interest in looking at whether there are any autistic artists who are employed to take parts in movies or series.

Employability

“Across theatre, film, and television there is a wider range of possible roles that could be portrayed to show the many faces of autism. It is still the case in 2018, that most autistic roles are generally not cast with autistic actors” (Rubin, 2018).

As Rubin (2018) outlined in this quotation from his blog, from the mass cultural products mentioned in this discussion only one from six producers employed an autistic person. Thus, there appears to be a need for production companies to employ more disabled people to possibly

discard the dominant disablist notions found in the media (Ellis & Goggin, 2015). However, executive producers and directors often report feeling anxious about the necessary accommodations and the increased supervision needed when employing disabled people (Raynor & Hayward, 2009). In fact, Skillset (as cited in PirsI & Popovska, 2013) reports that only 2.3% of disabled people make up the workforce within the media industry. Despite such misconceptions, most disabled people do not require expensive accommodations (Breedon, 2012). For instance, in *Loop*, the director Milsom (as cited in Pixar Central, 2020) outlined that Madison Bandy only needed the small accommodation of recording at home.

However, advancements were made in 2006 with the development of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2018). For the purpose of this discussion, the most significant is Article 30, which states that disabled people have the right to participate in cultural life and should have access to places and participation of cultural performances. Certain production companies also issued their policies that are in line with Article 30. For instance, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) policy states that the company will ensure that its products are made accessible to their disabled audience, while also reassuring that the necessary accommodations will be made for their disabled employees (BBC, 2010). I felt that these policies are important as having such tools can help autistic people among others increase their employment opportunities in the media industry.

Following the creation of the aforementioned policy, the BBC started employing more disabled artists, including autistic artists. For instance, in 2008 Lizzy Clarke an adolescent diagnosed with 'high functioning' autism was employed to cast in the main part of the autistic

teenager Poppy in the film *Dustbin Baby*, who wanted to find her family routes (May, 2008). Similarly, in 2017, the BBC employed Travis Smith, an autistic actor who starred in *The A Word* (Spence, Frayn, Bowker, Nir & Johnson, 2017-2019). During an interview, this actor felt the need to outline “I think in real life I was never really myself. I was playing a character” (Arkless, 2018). His courage to outline this made me realize that some individuals with autism may feel the need to hide their true selves to accommodate society’s expectations. Cook, Ogden and Winstone (2007) continue to confirm this need that some feel, where they found that a number of autistic people mask their autism in order to fit in groups and be accepted by others. Following this experience, both Lizzy Clarke and Travis Smith felt proud of having contributed in sending the message to their viewers that disabled people are experts of their identity, thus making them the only ones who can portray their life on mass media (BBC Shropshire, 2009; National Autistic Society, 2017).

More recently, Freeway Studio also employed Kayla Cromer to play Matilda, an autistic adolescent who lost her father in the new comedy series aired in January 2020, called *Everything’s Gonna Be Okay* (Swedlove, Whyt, Allen-Turner, Martin & Thoday, 2020). Kayla Cromer also has autism. In fact, in an article by *Disability Scoop*, she expresses that autistic people have a right to depict their disabilities, while also expressing the need for other production industries to employ autistic artists (Heasley, 2019).

Through exploring these experiences, one can note how all the artists expressed a sense of pride in identifying autism as part of their identity. In the next section, the affirmative model

of disability will be used to explore how autistic people are possibly using other forms of media to challenge society's and large production industry's disabling perspectives.

Autistic and proud

The title for the section is taken from a newspaper article which features an interview with Roy an autistic adult, who advocated that there is nothing wrong with wanting to be alone or with one's decision to socialise with only a certain amount of people (Trivedi, 2005). This self-pride reminds me of the affirmative model of disability that discards the believe that disability is problematic or an individualised problem (Stöckl, 2014). Just as Roy (as cited in Trivedi, 2005) outlined, this model also advocates that disabled people are proud and strong (McCormack & Collins, 2011). The disability arts movement is also in concordance with the affirmative model where disabled people can express their identity's pride through their artistic creation.

Although in the previous sections we saw that some companies are working with autistic organisations and also employing autistic artists, the way autism is represented is still largely determined by the directors, executive producers or the writers. According to Briant, Watson and Philo (2013), this may lead autistic people to still be largely represented either as individuals who need a cure as in *A boy called Po* (Asher, 2016) or as living a life of hardship as in *Dustbin Baby* (May, 2008) or as superhumans as in the case of *Rain Man* (Levinson, 1988) and *The Good Doctor* (Dae Kim, 2017-2019). Thus, while considering the perspective of the affirmative model, I am interested in looking at how the autistic community is possibly defying such dominant representations.

The creation of online platforms has offered an opportunity for autistic activists to express themselves and share their artistic products online (Brownlow, O'Dell & Rosqvist, 2013). One of the dominant platforms being used is YouTube. For instance, Selove (2020) an autistic YouTuber posted a video titled *S#!t Autistic Couples say to each other*, where through unfiltered comments he expresses his feelings of pride in having defeated society's presumptions that autistic people are unable to love. He also uses humour to purposefully show that some autistic people understand and use jokes to their advantage. Agony Aunty (2019) also prepared a small narrative in one of her YouTube vlogs titled 'Autistic Behaviour: What's that?' where she takes pride in her ability to learn through her senses rather than through the normative learning procedures. She also refuses to accept the myth that autistic people 'live in a world of their own' as seen in *A boy called Po* (Asher, 2016) and argues that, when autistic children 'zone out', they are trying to keep calm in a world which is constantly correcting their behaviour. Although I am not going through all the other channels it is important to note that there are other autistic YouTubers who express pride in their own identities including *Neurodivergent Rebel*, *Ellen Jones* and *Dean Badle*. This discussion specifically focused on Selove (2020) and Agony Aunty (2019) as through their vlogs they both show that some autistic people can be humorous.

Apart from YouTube channels, there are also autistic organisations who are working to increase autistic artists participation in arts. For instance, the organisations *Actors for Autism* (2019) and *We are Not So Different* (2019) are both working to provide training programs in the arts sector to increase its members' participation in the industry of films, television and elite cultural products. One can also note how the names of both organisations are in line with the

affirmative model as they express pride in their own identity, while indirectly sending the message that just as 'neurotypicals' they are capable of participating in cultural products.

Finally, initiatives such as the Autofest film festival (2019) and blogs such as The Arts of Autism (2020) have increased opportunities for autistic artists to express themselves through different art mediums including low budget films, poetry and arts. For instance, Nihilivonne (2019) posted his poem in The Arts of Autism blog to express his anger towards society for leading autistic individuals to wear masks to confine with norms and says:

The loudest is always right,
and all feelings are perverted,
and emotions are considered to be defective
unless they are diplomatically hypocritical.
But there is no way back to nature.
Put on the mask and do the monkey dance

(Nihilivonne, 2019)

Conclusion

Through discussing the portrayal of autism in mass cultural products, I realised that culture can truly have multiple definitions depending on ones' identity, social environment and the available cultural products. However, although culture is not easily defined, I felt the need to conclude with Arnold's (1932) argument that culture metaphorically teaches the individual's

mind to socially improve oneself. Although Arnold's (1932) focus was mostly on elite cultural products, I felt that his arguments are also applicable to the mass cultural products analysed throughout this discussion.

The 'positive' cultural effects can be acknowledged to some extent in the films and series discussed as they all increased their viewers' awareness of autism. Cultural products such as *Loop* also contributed in sending the message that autistic people can establish positive peer relationships with 'neurotypical' peers, discarding the negative stereotype that all autistic children are unable to establish friendships (Mac Carthaigh, 2019). Production companies are also recognizing the importance of employing disabled people to realistically portray autism. A sense of pride in one's own identity was also noted in the online mass cultural products, where currently autistic people are using tools such as YouTube and blogs to rebel against the oppressive misrepresentations that having autism equates to a life of hardship, communication dependence or social naiveness. Thus, such cultural products are being used to share the disabling experiences that autistic people encounter while challenging the dominant social fictions surrounding their disability (Synder, Brueggermann, & Garland-Thomson, 2002). Additionally, the fact that organisations of autism are organising various training courses, continues to open various opportunities for other disabled people to share their personal narratives while collectively creating a positive identity (McCormack & Collins, 2011).

Yet, one must acknowledge that autism is still largely represented in accordance with the dominant discourses, where some of the mass cultural products still misrepresent autistic people as being in need of a 'cure', as life-long children or as beyond the ordinary intelligent human

beings. Some of the outlined cultural products also metaphorically portray autistic people as bringing out the inherent good in others. Moreover, YouTube channels and organisations of autism mentioned above have made me realize that more changes are needed within the media industry. In my opinion employing autistic and other disabled people to take part in mass cultural products is not enough, as disabled artists need to give their own opinions on how the character's story should proceed. According to Ejaz (2020), such measure will lead mass media to move away from harmful hegemonic notions on autism. Additionally, as with other disabilities, autistic artists have rarely been chosen to portray non-disabled characters (Huckabee, 2011). This may imply that society still sees them as the 'other', thus not fit to carry out other roles. It also continues to highlight the need for the creation of more stories that show that disability is part of someone's identity rather than a burden. I believe that such advancements in the media industry will enable us to continue moving away from the dominant cultural representations that are supported by society.

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