

Abstract:

### Pros and Cons of Character Portrayals of Autism on TV and Film

Portrayals of characters with Autism Spectrum Disorder and/or with autistic traits on film and in TV-series are increasing. Such portrayals may contribute in increasing awareness of the condition but can also increase stereotypes. Thus, these character portrayals are subject to heated debate within the ASD-community, but also in the general public at large. Following our recent published study on character portrayals of ASD on film and TV we here address some central issues related advantages and disadvantage of such portrayals.

Letter to the editor

## Pros and Cons of Character Portrayals of Autism on TV and Film

Portrayals of characters with psychiatric disorders in film and TV-series have been reported on in research (Butler & Hyler, 2005; Conn & Bhugra, 2012; Stuart, 2006) with a focus on violent representations, that are over-represented compared with real-life (Byrne, 2009). In comparison to psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia, depression, anxiety and split personality disorder, empirical research considering character portrayals of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are scarce. This may change as, in conjunction with the rise in prevalence of ASD, there has been a surge in characters with features, or a diagnosis, of autism in fictional films and TV-series. The accuracy of such portrayals is central to this distinction between beneficial and detrimental representations in the media. Fictional portrayals of people with ASD may have negative consequences, such as strengthening of stereotypes and stigma. On the other hand, such portrayals contribute in raising awareness about the condition (Baron-Cohen, 2015). There is also considerable potential for using screen portrayals as case-exemplars in mental health educational settings – in fact, an annotation in *The Lancet* in 1936 stated “*In the talking cinema, we suggest, psychiatry has an instrument not only for entertaining the mentally afflicted, but also for educating the uninitiated.*”.

Nevertheless, the accuracy of screen representations of autism remains a matter of intense debate in popular culture, the media at large, and within the autism research community, as well as for people on the spectrum and other stakeholders. A focus on how characters with ASD are portrayed in films and TV-series is important, as such

portrayals impact on the public perception of the condition and – if inaccurate - could lead to distorted views of what ASD actually is.

Films such as *Rain Man* have been very influential on people's perception of autism and although heightened awareness related to this film and others is a good thing, it could lead viewers to believe that, for instance, savantism and autism go hand in hand. Although prevalence of savant skills is higher among people on the spectrum than for any other condition, savantism still occurs in fewer than one in three people with ASD (Howlin, Goode, Hutton, & Rutter, 2009). Studies on film and TV portrayals of persons with ASD confirm the bias that savant skills are overrepresented (Garner, Jones, & Harwood, 2015; Nordahl-Hansen, Tøndevold, & Fletcher-Watson, 2017).

The usage of on-screen portrayals of autism in educational settings can be an asset if competent educators with in-depth knowledge, and preferably clinical experience with ASD, scaffold students in disentangling fiction from real life cases. Due to the heterogeneity that resides within the condition, and the smudged line between being on the spectrum and borderline cases, seeing a film with a character with ASD cannot do justice to the richness of the autistic experience. As such, one might say that if you have seen one film with an autistic character, you have indeed just seen one film with an autistic character (Nordahl-Hansen, In Press). However, viewing a combination of films and TV-series has potential to mirror some of the complexity of the condition, especially if supplemented with guidance from competent autism experts (Conn & Bhugra, 2012; Gamaglia, Jona, Imerator, Torre, Zeppegno, 2013; Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2017). Although fictional presentations should not be a substitution to meeting real life persons with ASD, films and TV-series may pose as possible exemplar cases

for educational purposes in courses for students in fields like special needs education, medicine, and clinical psychology.

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