

## GENERAL ENTRY (2000 to 5000 words\*)

### A. Your Address

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### B. Definition

This chapter focuses on the topic of character portrayals with Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in film and TV-series. We address this topic by presenting research from the general psychiatric field before we discuss the research on portrayals of characters with ASD. We will also provide the reader with some examples of films and TV-series that have been given particular attention in the popular media and that will be known to many, also outside of the autism community. We address both advantages and disadvantages that are consequences of popular-media portrayals of ASD.

### C. Historical Background

In the last few years there has been a surge of new characters in Fictional film and in TV-shows that either are labelled as having an autism spectrum disorder by the makers or by the public due to resembling traits and behaviours of the characters with that on the autism spectrum. In general, portrayals of people with psychiatric disorders in film and TV-series are not an uncommon topic of research particularly in disciplines like psychiatry and media-science (Butler & Hylar, 2005; Stuart, 2006), but may also be found in fields like sociology in for instance analyzing trends in society. Conditions like memory loss or disorders like schizophrenia, depression, anxiety and split personality have been thoroughly addressed (REF). Schneider notes that the link between psychiatry and movies go as far back as to the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with films like "The escapees from Charenton in 1901 (released in Britain under the name "Off to Bedlam", and in the US under the name "Off to Bloomingdale Asylum") (Schneider, 1987). Whether it be portrayals of psychiatrists or persons with psychiatric disorders, there are a lot of films, from drama to thrillers, from horror to comedy, available. Some of the films may be regarded as classics and films like "The three faces of Eve" (1957), "Psycho" (1960), "One flew over the Cuckoo's nest" (1975),

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"Fight Club" (1999), or "Shutter Island" (2010) and have had an impact on public perceptions of psychiatric disorders. Such portrayal on the screen influences the individual patient and their family, healthcare professionals and policymakers as well as contributing to affect global, societal attitudes (Wahl, 1995). However, a problem is that representations of psychiatric disorders in the mass media are often inaccurate and often over-represent links between for instance violence and mental illness (Edney, 2004; Stout, Villegas, & Jennings, 2004; Thornton & Wahl, 1996; Wahl, 2003). Also, fictional portrayals of persons with psychiatric disorders or neurological conditions on film have also contributed to mystification and misconceptions. For instance, portrayals of amnesia on film and TV usually bear little resemblance to reality, and in turn distort public conception of the condition (Baxendale, 2004; Hacking, 2009). Further, Butler and Hyler (2005) argue that it is a common feat in Hollywood movie portrayals of children and adolescents with mental health issues or psychiatric disorder to be presented in a mythical fashion, which may be harmful in terms of misguiding public understanding of different conditions and disorders.

During the past couple of decades portraying characters with Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) have become very popular in films and in TV-shows. So much that autism is now, by many, regarded as part of the general pop-culture (Belcher & Maich, 2014; Hacking, 2009). Since TV and film are highly influential sources in shaping public perception of ASD, surpassing sources like clinicians, researchers or actual encounters with people on the spectrum, it is important to address and investigate in what ways characters in TV and film are portrayed.

#### **D. Current Knowledge**

ASD, once considered a rare disorder is today regarded as a common neurodevelopmental disorder or condition with estimates of prevalence somewhere around 1% in the population (Baird et al., 2006; Kogan et al., 2009). Following the breakthrough film *Rain Man* (1988) the increase in characters with ASD in films and TV-series has been substantial (Conn & Bhugra, 2012; Hacking, 2010). Of course, there are examples of characters that have been portrayed as having autistic traits and behaviours before the 1980s, for example "Philip" in "Run Wild, Run Free" from 1969, and "Chance the gardener" in "Being There" from 1979, but the knowledge of autism at that point in time was limited and the disorder was not even a formal diagnosis in DSM before 1980. Either way it is safe to say that the release of the movie *Rain Man* marks a starting point for when autism, both as a term and as a disorder, reached a larger part of the society's perception.

As discussed by Damjanovic and colleagues (2009) and Draaisma (2009) characters with ASD on film and TV may contribute to influencing public knowledge and shaping attitudes towards the condition. But how are characters with ASD portrayed on the screen? As we noted earlier films with characters with psychiatric disorders are known to present disorders in an unfortunate way in terms of for instance violent behaviours. However, autistic characters are typically not portrayed in this way. Instead some argue that characters with ASD have a tendency to be portrayed more like heroes (Belcher & Maich, 2014) and with special talents (Hacking, 2009) and although this perhaps looks fine at first glance it may not give an accurate picture of ASD.

Publications in scholarly journals on the topic of ASD on TV can be found in various disciplines such as film history, media, philosophy, sociology, psychology and psychiatry to name a few. Many of the publications take the form of in-depth analyses on advantages and disadvantages of portrayals of ASD on screen. Examples of key publications here are Douwe Draaisma's article on Stereotypes of autism (2009) and Stuart Murray's article where the public consciousness of autism is analysed in light of the increased fascination of the disorder (2006). Other publications are case-studies where a character in a film or TV-show is being dissected in light of his or her ASD-diagnosis or his or her autistic-like traits or behaviours (see for instance Cockain, 2016; Tobia & Thoma, 2016).

There are few studies that report on quantitative data from larger samples of films portraying characters with ASD. Conn and Bhugra (2012) described a sample of 23 films noting that most films with characters with ASD are in the drama genre. They also argue that although there are concerns as to whether portrayals are realistic or not, there are possibilities for using fictional films for educational purposes within health sciences such as medicine and psychiatry.

Another quantitative approach on autism and film was undertaken in a PhD-thesis published in 2014 (Garner, 2014) as well as a publication the following year (Garner, Jones, & Harwood, 2015). Garner and colleagues used the Childhood Autism Rating Scale – Second edition (CARS2: Schopler, Van Bourgondien, Wellman, & Love, 2010) to score 15 characters with ASD from various films. The authors concluded that character portrayals, compared to an average autism-affected population, were more severe in their display of autism symptomology (Garner, 2015).

A recent study used the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) to investigate whether diagnostic criteria lined up with behaviours and traits displayed by fictional portrayals of characters with ASD (Nordahl-Hansen, Tøndevold, &

Fletcher-Watson, 2017). In the sample of 26 there were 22 films and four TV-series that included characters in highly popular TV-series that has been linked to the autism spectrum (Community, 2009-2015, The Big Bang Theory, 2007-, The Bridge, 2011-, Alphas, 2011-2012). The results from this study was much in line with results found in Garner et al. (2015) as a majority in the sample was in very close alignment with DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for an autism spectrum diagnosis.

In general, the researchers conclude that character portrayals are somehow over-emphasized when it comes to displaying autistic traits, which in turn may reinforce stereotypes of the disorder. This is interesting considering a common criticism from the autism community that most portrayals, at least this past decade, are so-called "high-functioning" verbal characters with low levels of support needed in for instance everyday living. In this respect it is interesting to note that a character like Abed Nadir in the TV-show "Community" has the lowest score on autistic traits in the Nordahl-Hansen et al. (2017) sample but is one of the most embraced characters in various "Asperger-communities".

A topic of very high interest to the people making films and TV-shows about fictional characters with ASD that display exceptional skills or savant skills. It is easy to understand that savant skills are fascinating and just as easy to understand that screenwriters "give" these features to their characters in the hopes of making them more interesting. However, this has led to the impression that savant skills are something that most people with ASD have. But for instance the DSM-5 criteria for ASD (APA, 2013) do not make particular notice of savant skills or savant syndrome although fixated or special interests may or may not be regarded as savant like skills. It is not clear how many individuals within the ASD population that actually have savant skills much due to varying definitions of what constitutes savant skills. However, research indicates that the prevalence might be somewhere between 10% (Treffert, 2014) to approximately 30% (Howlin, Goode, Hutton, and Rutter, 2009) within the ASD population. Although these prevalence estimates are higher than in other populations it is not a common feat in persons with ASD. Even so, there is a tendency to portray characters with ASD on screen as having savant skills (Conn & Bhugra, 2012; Garner et al., 2015; Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2017) or as being intellectually stimulating geniuses (Belcher & Maich, 2014).

## **E. Future Directions**

Although there are similarities between many films and TV-shows in the ways characters with ASD are portrayed there are also large differences both in terms of the portrayals but also of thematic difficulties addressed. Some films show scenes that will relate to families and people on the spectrum. Problems as a consequence of hypersensitivity to environmental stimuli, problems in school and struggles with academic success to severe bullying are some recurring themes. Further, difficulties regarding dating, sex and relationships are frequent topic but also more overarching existential issues and general difficulties with social communication that leads to feelings of social ostracism. Nevertheless, critique has been raised about the over-representation of middle-class white males either in their teens or young adults that are so-called "high functioning". This is particularly evident in the typical "Hollywood" mainstream portrayals of ASD and the debate has increased in strength following the release of TV-series like "The Big Bang Theory" and more recently "The good Doctor" and "Atypical", the latter two both aired for the first time in autumn 2017.

For the purposes of giving the public a nuanced view of the heterogeneity that resides within the autistic spectrum a variety of portrayals of persons with ASD on screen would be a step in the right direction. That being said, one character portrayal in a film or TV-show cannot capture the complexity that resides with the entire autism spectrum, nor do justice to the variety of autistic lived experience (Nordahl-Hansen, 2017). There are however, fictional films and TV-series available that portray characters with ASD in a wide variety of ways but many of these depictions do not reach as wide an audience as the so-called mainstream "Hollywood" productions. In addition to more films and TV-series portraying characters with ASD that have higher needs of everyday-support it would be welcoming to see more films with characters that are minimally or non-verbal or even display self-injurious behaviours. Further, although there are exceptions, like *Snow Cake* (2006), *The Bridge* (2011-), *Fly Away* (2011), *Molly* (1999), and *Mozart and the whale* (2005) to name a few, more female characters with ASD on film and TV would also be welcome.

Additionally, portrayals of autism and ageing is almost entirely missing so although there has been a marked increase in characters with ASD in fictional films and TV-shows there are still many gaps to fill.

Many of the films and TV-series that are available can be viewed by children but in most cases parental guidance are encouraged but British and American TV-channels have started including characters with ASD in TV-programs

that target the child as the main consumer. It is of high importance that character portrayals of persons with ASD on TV for kids do not lead to stereotype thinking of the disorder. If portrayed with care, respect, and adjusted to the target age-groups, characters with ASD on the screen may teach and inform children in ways to act and behave in an inclusive manner. Of course, herein there is a great potential in reducing bullying. Furthermore, Feedback from the adult autism community on portrayals of characters with ASD is that although many do not familiarize with characters on screen, many others do. This may be of particular importance for children who are experiencing being different from other peers of similar age and thus having difficulty fitting in. Characters with autistic traits in TV-shows for children could be a potential help for children with ASD to better understand their condition.

Finally, portrayals of characters with ASD in film and TV have been proposed for use in higher education for example in training of health-care personell (Conn and Bhugra, 2012; Gabbard & Horowitz, 2010; Safran, 1998; Sartorius et al., 2010; Butler and Hyler, 2005). However, to what extent portrayals of individuals with ASD are good or bad, or right or wrong, is not easy to determine since individual portrayals cannot capture the heterogeneity that resides within the Autism spectrum. Therefore, although on-screen portrayals of autism can be a good point of departure for further discussion in educational settings (Conn & Bhugra, 2012; Gramaglia, Jona, Imperatori, Torre, Zeppegno, 2013; Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2017), competent educators with in-depth knowledge and experience with persons with ASD, will be key as character portrayals can never capture real life. To make use of insights from actually autistic people would further strengthen the potential of usage of film and TV for educational purposes.

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