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Excessively Positive Narratives Diminish Autistic People of All Ages

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Abstract

Evolving discourse about autistic individuals swims in murky territory, with ongoing debates over how the autistic community should represent itself and how the neurotypical population should engage with them. One tendency that has emerged is the depiction of autistic individuals as kind and well-intentioned but also simpleminded and guileless. This, in combination with the dominant imagery of autistic individuals as children, has created an atmosphere in which all autistic individuals are stripped of their human complexity by the neurotypical gaze, and by extension are not given the fulfillment, support, and resources needed to make possible a life of sufficient quality.

Keywords:

Autism, Autistic Adults, Narratives, Applied Behavior Analysis

Introduction

Current discourse about autism, which is often centered around children and inspirational stories, either excludes adults or infantilizes autistic people of all ages.

For all the diversity of people on the autism spectrum, the overall message in popular media and the testimonial pages of many awareness-raising nonprofit groups (Autism Speaks, n.d.) is relentlessly formulaic: the protagonist suffers from debilitating symptoms, but with the right support system they eventually overcome many of their difficulties and make progress towards adjusting to society's general expectation.

This is a positive formula I abided by in my own personal retellings. Materially, I had all the trappings of an "autism success story;" thanks largely to early detection and effective behavioral intervention based on the principles of applied behavior analysis (ABA), I have now far surpassed the original prognosis that I would only have a 50/50 chance of eventually attending a "mainstream" K-12 school. Instead of banging my head against the wall in frustration, I mutter profanities like a self-conscious New Yorker; rather than hiding in the corner to play with the carpet at parties, I gingerly find contrived excuses to approach strangers, like the time I placed my drink on an occupied table because "I needed both hands to check something on my phone." I am willing to compromise with friends and housemates, even if

that means sacrificing my principle of never letting a single morsel of food go to waste, no matter how far past the expiration date it has been lingering. Life in general is a pleasant, even fulfilling, experience.

Because I surpassed my original prognosis so drastically, advocacy and media organizations have invited me to share my insight to parents, educators, and doctors hoping to advance the cause of supporting autistic people and promote ABA as a humane and effective treatment, at least when applied correctly. I believed in my narrative of hard-won achievement, encapsulated in one 2016 seminar by its rather self-congratulatory title: "My Path from Autism to the University of Chicago." But for all my waxing about how "tenacity" and "hope" helped me overcome autism's most debilitating symptoms, I said little about the self-defeating, mean-spirited, and less traditionally virtuous tendencies I might still carry as an adult. This was not an intentional cover-up, at least consciously; my sense of worth hinged on my overcoming autism, and so I had convinced myself that it was overcome completely.

By whitewashing our accounts of "overcoming" autism, we stifle discourse and awareness about the most severe problems and character flaws we possessed and may still possess in adulthood. When this happens, both autistic children and adults are deprived of the support and resources they need to live healthy and fulfilling lives. In my stories, I would mention to audiences my social anxiety, my compulsion to prove my intelligence to others, and my recurrent misunderstanding of non-verbal cues. But these are vague, generalized points that do not shed light on how problems borne from autism or from the experience of autism can actively complicate my quality of life and the strength of my character—or, in other words, make me human.

I still agonize over the smallest faux pas I might have committed more than ten years ago, scrutinizing mental lists of witnesses who may or may not still remember and associate the incident with their opinion towards me. And yet, I am often quick to make moral and intellectual judgments of others, as if to convince myself that I am superior, somehow, over at least some people. But at least my judgement is less expressive and indiscriminate than it was before; in middle school, I comforted myself by verbally bullying classmates who I deemed to be "even lower" on the social hierarchy, including other neurodivergent peers. Autism has made me both more empathetic and more selfish. I want to do what is kind and just because I know what it is like to experience cruelty and injustice; at the same time, I am so insecure of my social position and reputation that I sometimes step over others to aggrandize myself.

To exclude nuance is to promote a false and problematic narrative of autistic people, with serious consequences. A workplace cannot accommodate an autistic adult, and a school cannot assist an autistic child, if they misunderstand who they seek to help—any attempt would only result in frustration, even trauma. The problem of nuance, or lack thereof, is not wholly the fault of me or a few others who might have once told a few varnished stories. The cause is also institutional. In popular media depictions, the characteristics projected on autistic people often appear to be the diametric opposites of negative characteristics that used to define the stereotypical autistic person. While autistic people are now less likely to be pigeonholed as crass, insensitive robots, they are increasingly viewed as innocent, endearingly eccentric victims who deserve the same protection and loving condescension as a gurgling infant. Even when they do not embody such traits, paternalistic expectations for them to conform in that manner and shield them from the world strips them of their agency and creates self-fulfilling prophesies of dependency.

This problem is reinforced by the high tendency of popular media and charitable organizations to depict autistic children rather than adults (Stevenson et al., 2011), which causes their consumers to envision autism as an adolescent issue above all else, and autistic adults as perpetual children. Rather than being harassed for flapping their left-hand mid-sentence, one autistic adult I know now receives comically infantilizing comments from peers of the same age. Another autistic adult graduates from high school like most other people do, and a photo of him in his robes is posted on a subreddit for "cute and cuddly pictures" alongside all the cats and dogs and plump, beady-eyed bunnies. I may no longer have this issue in my day-to-day life, but that is only because I learned to conceal my autistic tendencies after incidents like having to explain why I do not need a special helper to follow me around in public at age 17. Innocence and endearing eccentricity are not negative qualities by themselves, and representing autistic children is important. But when these things are used to reduce autistic people to a quarter-dimension of normal human complexity and intelligence, it creates a demoralizing, belittling experience for all of them.

There are many autistic people who suffer from more explicit and brutal forms of hardship, discrimination, and oppression, especially if they come from lower-income families, are nonwhite (Mandell et al., 2009), and cannot access resources like reliable, correctly practiced ABA-based therapy. Sometimes, people like 13-year-old Linden Cameron or 3-year-old Katie McCarron must even pay a blood price (Fortin, 2020). Poorly-conceived depictions of autism exacerbate these problems when much-needed attention is drawn away from their plight and redirected

towards shinier, more wholesome narratives. By over-promoting these kinds of narratives, we construct an idealization that encompasses everyone across the autism spectrum; and at the point in which we are no longer in touch with diverse and often harsh realities, we are fighting not for people, but for empty air.

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