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Autism and Our Society's Relationship With It

Year after year, more and more autism diagnoses are made. With the frequency of these diagnoses steadily increasing over time, one would be inclined to think that autism and those who fall with in its spectrum are steadily becoming a more normalized part of society. However, this is still not the case. Studies on and accounts from those living on the autism spectrum have substantially increased our understanding of it and the ways in which it functions similarly to and different from neurotypical life, so why is there still such a struggle to accept it? It seems as though this acceptance will not come until those who are not on the spectrum are able to stop finding ways to other autistic people from themselves.

Like most other disabilities and subcategories of neurodivergence, autism is typically viewed as something that makes someone "less than" others in society. In Melanie Yergeau's "Introduction: Involution," found in *Authoring Autism*, she discusses the ways in which our society frequently seeks out ways to dehumanize autistic people. After quoting rhetorician Todd Oakley's thoughts on a supposed lack of understanding and functionality with rhetoric within the autism spectrum, Yergeau boils his ideas down to "one must be human in order to be rhetorical, autistic people are not rhetorical, autistic people are not human" (Yergeau, 11). Oakley's quote, though problematic and somewhat horrifying - especially when put into more simple terms by

Yergeau, holds opinions that are not all that uncommon in modern society. Society oftentimes looks at autistic people as unable to contribute to society or hold meaningful, intelligent conversations - a negative assumption that relies on neurotypicals to *not* make the equally negative base assumption that all autistic people are completely non-verbal. According to Yergeau, the years have seen a vast number of theories looking to point to reasons that should remove personhood from autistic people. These theories develop by locking on to various traits and behaviors found in autism - oftentimes, ones that are entirely harmless - and heavily pathologizing them with "clinically ornate buzzwords" (Yergeau, 11). As these theories gain relevance and notoriety in neurotypical society, they start to get introduced into medical canon, further increasing our societal fear or autism. This increased fear, developed almost entirely through unresearched, fear-mongering hearsay, has led people to go so far as to not vaccinate their children because of their inherent anxiety around autism.

Fear and dehumanization, though they may still be worryingly common, are not the only societal responses to autism. Through literature, film, television, and other forms of entertainment, fictional depictions of autistic people have been some of the major reasons for positive responses. For instance, the introduction of the autistic character Julia on *Sesame Street* has created both positive representation for young autistic viewers as well as a positive view on autism for neurotypical children who may come into contact with children who are on the spectrum. However, not all of these fictional depictions are as "positive" as they appear to be. When most people think of "good, positive" representation of those on the autism spectrum in film and television, their minds first bring up examples like *A Beautiful Mind* and *The Good Doctor*. These popular depiction feature characters who experience savant syndrome, a condition

in which someone who is otherwise mentally disabled shows outstanding abilities in certain skills, oftentimes far beyond the average for neurotypicals. The subject of *A Beautiful Mind*, John Forbes Nash, Jr., while not autistic, was heavily skilled in mathematics despite complications from schizophrenia and finished his lengthy, fulfilling life as a Nobel Laureate in economics. *The Good Doctor*'s Dr. Shawn Murphy is constantly shown figuring out medical procedures and answering the health questions of various hospital patients far more easily than his older, more experienced, neurotypical colleagues despite his struggles with autism. The overwhelming popularity of these types of portrayals stems from the fact that they are essentially "inspiration porn" to the abled viewer. Neurotypical audiences love tuning in, week after week, to *The Good Doctor*, knowing that they will feel uplifted and inspired watching Dr. Murphy wow his constituents and save lives with the power given by his savant syndrome. Beyond all of the problems that come along with this "inspiration porn" aspect, a greater problem lies in the fact that society is falling in love with a version of autism that hardly exists. Savant syndrome is extremely rare, not just for autistic people, but for the mentally disabled in general. It is not a statistic that has increased proportionally with the steady increase of autism diagnoses, ergo making it as unrealistic of a portrayal as the dehumanizing theories.

So, if one respected outlook on autism is too negative, and the other too idealistic and positive, how do we gain a better, more accurate understanding of autistic people? The answer is simply just listening to them rather than seeking out theories and pieces of entertainment created - oftentimes by neurotypicals - about them. In "Introduction: Involution", Melanie Yergeau speaks about her childhood experiences, crying rarely in infancy, struggling to make friends, becoming hyper-fixated on AAA maps, and how all of these experiences began to make sense

after her autism diagnosis as an adult (Yergeau, 1). Yergeau also uses her writing to disprove both the negative and the overly positive views, showing that she is not only intelligent, eloquent, and capable of engaging in in rhetoric, but also just as regular of a person as any neurotypical. She is neither the bellowing, unintelligible Benjy Compson of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, nor the graceful savant that is *The Good Doctor*'s Dr. Murphy.

Gaining a deeper and more accurate understanding should not stop at just reading Yergeau's writing, however. One person's autistic experience is not every autistic experience. There are savants and there are nonverbals and there are many, many complexities that lie between. The best way for a predominately neurotypical society to truly accept and understand autism as just as intrinsic as neurotypicality is to give a platform to autistic people of any condition.

I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work. Britt Ingels.

Works Cited

Yergeau, Natalie. “Introduction: Involution.” *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. Accessed 30 April 2019