Autism in Contemporary TV Shows: A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Educators Perceptions on Neurodiverse Learners

Alana Goldstein
Theodoto W. Ressa[1]

College of Education, Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan
U.S.A.

Abstract

There is a growing trend to represent autism positively in current television shows, and many viewers, including educators, learn about autism from these media. However, media information is never neutral but always laced with the message intended to influence viewers' perceptions of autistic people. This study sought to explore the depiction of autistic characters in three TV shows to determine the possible consequences of their portrayal, whether accurate or inaccurate, on neurotypical educators. The perceptions nondisabled form from viewing autistic characters in TV can influence their perception of autistic learners. Thematic analysis informed by the disability studies framework reveals that modern-day TV shows feature common autistic stereotypes less representative of the autistic population. Such stereotypes create irreversible incorrect perceptions and beliefs in educators that hurt real autistic students and their community. Then, educators must view TV shows with a critical lens so that they do not form inaccurate perceptions of autistic learners.

Keywords: media, perception, educators, autism, disability

It is becoming a more popular trend to feature characters with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) on TV. This is due to the success of different forms of media that feature autistic characters[2] as protagonists or in other important roles. Therefore, viewers, including educators, learn about neurodiversity and, specifically, autism through these media. Besides exposure to films in the home, using media in classrooms as teaching instruments hasgrown significantly globally and in the United States due to improved technology and digital media. Schools rely on media to train educators, many of whom are already exposed to TV series with autistic characters. However, the use of films raises vital questions about the perceptions of viewers. The influence and value of films should be considered in instilling appropriate educational practices in teacher educators and trainees.

Perception is the depiction of what people become aware of through their senses (Alawad & Kambal, 2019). It involves the ideas and beliefs that TV viewers have of autistic people. Information gathered by educators affects how they relate to, interact with, and treat autistic children and their families (Danforth, 2014). Perception is contextual, but it is influenced by the environment, climate, culture, history, and viewers' orientations (Haller, 2010). Then, how neurotypical educators perceive autistic students can vary widely based on how they are represented in the media. This paper is part of a larger study that examined the representation of autistic people and their qualities in the media (Goldstein, 2020). We focus on the representation of autism in recent TV shows to discern their influence on neurotypical viewers such as educators. We aim to trigger attitudinal changes that will lead to individual transformations and, therefore, nurturing a tolerant culture towards neurodiverse learners. The goal is to provide directions that can reduce disability stigma and bring to the fore disability history, pride, equality, and equity in all realms of life, including education.

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[1]ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4599-921X

[2]Even though person-first language (e.g., a person with autism) is widely used in the literature by nondisabled people, we used identity-first language (e.g., autistic people) because we value the rights of the autistic community to choose and accept the language that makes them more comfortable and empowered (Brown, 2011; Sinclair, 2005).

The first author is a special education teacher candidate and the second author is a professor of Disability and Equity Studies in Education. Based on our expertise, we insightfully engage in critical reflection to answer the guiding question: How does the representation of autistic people in contemporary TV shows affect the perception of neurotypical educators of autistic students in real life?

Literature Review

Media are means by which information perceived through human senses (touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste) is mass communicated (Lee, 2010). Messages may be relayed digitally (e.g., via social media), physically (e.g., books), or in in-person interactions (e.g., rallies) (Haller, 2010). Shared information has a potential influence on people's perceptions and survival tactics. Different technology (e.g., computers, TV) is used to relay information, and an increasing media design is used to educate through entertainment. This educational entertainment (i.e., the portmanteau edutainment) often includes educational content infused with entertainment value that influences people's perceptions and stereotypes (Conn & Bhugra, 2012).

Perception is the meaning-making process of gathering information through senses (Alawad & Kambal, 2019), while stereotypes are the reactions to and expectations of prejudice (Draaisma, 2009). The media are full of autism stereotypes (Haller, 2010; McHue, 2018; Poe & Mosely, 2016). Autistic characters often fall victim to stereotypes of ASD in popular media such as TV (Holton, 2013), mainly portrayed as savants but incapable of independent living without a nondisabled person (Conn & Bhugra, 2012; Garner et al., 2015; Prochnow, 2014). Neurotypical viewers of media with savant autistic characters are likely to believe that autistic people have different talents (Draaisma, 2009). Such stereotypes, however, cloud autism characteristics, especially when merged with normal behaviors, making it difficult for the autism community to champion their identity (Draaisma ,2009). McHue's(2018) analysis of how autism is depicted in the crime drama genre concluded that neurodiverse detectives are usually portrayed as defective or dysfunctional but thriving in their detective work, which falls under the savant stereotype (Garner et al., 2015). For example, Sonya Cross in *The Bridge* (2013) and Dr. Temperance Brennan in *Bones* (2005).

Conn and Bhugra's (2012) study of 23 popular movies found that autism is often used as an entertainment tool with little regard for accurately depicting the condition. Habitually, the media industry selects mesmerizing autistic behaviors that neurotypical viewers consider pleasant, including superhuman abilities and extremely awkward social deficits (Conn & Bhugra, 2012). Usually, autistic characters are paired with psychologically troubled neurotypical characters so that the former can heal the latter (Conn & Bhugra, 2012). The popular savant-healer stereotype gives neurotypical viewers the impression that the purpose of the autistic individualis to perform godlike acts and serves as emotional healers. Movies with autistic characters with incongruous capabilities can cause misleading misconceptions, harming the autism community. Conn and Bhugra (2012) also noted that out of the films they analyzed, none discussed the factors of autism's genetic basis. In addition, they mention that no films they analyzed addressed the presence of other disabilities associated with autism— stomach issues, epilepsy, and hearing problems. Information passed by the media is open for interpretation and misinformation. For example, the media engage in deception when they portray autism as a curable condition (e.g., in *Molly*, *Silent Fall*) or suggest that autism occurs in children who do not receive enough affection from their parents (e.g., in *Temple Grandin*) (Conn & Bhugra, 2012).

Different autism rating scales include the Autism Spectrum Rating Scales (ASRS; Ghaziuddin & Welch, 2013) and Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS2; Garner et al., 2015). CARS2's fifteen behavioral categories are relate, adapt, visualize, listen, taste, imitate, emotion, body, object, activity, intellect, overall impression, fear, verbal, and non-verbal. Every category gets rated between one (meaning normal behavior) and four (meaning very abnormal). A study by Garner et al. (2015) where an education specialist and clinical psychologist watched and rated the perceptiveness of autism in fifteen movies showed that for almost every CARS2 category, the gravity of autism was portrayed to be higher in films than the median scores for an actual autistic population. The findings of Garner et al. (2015) reveal that films usually depict extreme representations of autism. Also, they found superhuman abilities and little capability of independent functioning as the two predominant stereotypes of autistic people in films. In reality, most autism cases fall between these extremes. Besides, Garner et al. (2015) also argued that some movie autistic characters would not merit a clinical diagnosis based on the CARS2 scale. Neurotypicals can score high ratings on the CARS2 scale. Besides, other disabilities or health conditions could warrant similar traits compared to the traits linked with autism. Each movie that diagnoses autistic characters in its description "suggests for the lay viewer that the representation of autism in the film is irrefutably present and should be accepted" (Garner et al., 2015, p. 421). This means films give false diagnoses that perpetuate autism myths.

Despite the autism myths, media remain a vital edutainment tool in society. Recent media representation of autism is more accurate than before (Conn & Bhugra, 2012; Garner et al., 2015; Prochnow, 2014). While those portrayals bring awareness to autism, they repeatedly reinforce the savantism stereotype. Still, little information exists on the effect of the savantism stereotype on educators. The authors scrutinize TV shows with autistic characters to understand their impact on neurotypical educators' perceptions. We then examine how the resultant perceptions may affect the relationships between neurotypical teachers and autistic learners.

Methods

This qualitative study is grounded on the Disability Studies framework. Siebers (2008) mentions that "Disability studies does not treat disease or disability, hoping to cure or avoid them; it studies the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression, attacking the widespread belief that having an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being" (pp. 3-4). Unlike the medical model that focuses on disability as social deviance, the social model of disability strongly focuses on hegemony as the basis of its theoretical and empirical work. Taking the latter stance to examine the representation of autistic people in popular TV shows provides the space to understand how the media construct autism and influences educators' behaviors, feelings, and beliefs toward real autistic students.

Critical study of media with autistic characters requires knowledge of autism. Autism is majorly understood through lived experiences of autistic people (Brown, 2011; Sinclair, 2005) and publications by the *American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5; 2013). Brown (2011) and Sinclair (2005) argue that autism is intrinsic to a person's identity because it is a lifelong, neurological, developmental quality. Like the general population, autistic people exhibit similar and unique attributes that distinguish their culture from the neurotypical community's culture (the basis of judgment and discrimination). Also, they share certain cultural aspects with the neurotypical community. They have similar and dissimilar social, political, linguistic, cognitive, and physical qualities—they think quickly or slowly, are easily stimulated or not easily overstimulated, have visual fixations, experience stimming, are verbal or nonverbal(Sinclair, 2005).Contrarily, according to DSM-5, ASD "is a complex developmental condition that involves persistent challenges in social interaction, speech, and nonverbal communication, and restricted/repetitive behaviors" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). From the social model of disability standpoint, emphasis on medical traits at the expense of the whole person (Brown, 2011) is oppressive to autistic people. Even so, ASD people exhibit different qualities, and the impact on one's life varies markedly depending on the environment (Sinclair, 2005), which explains why autism is considered a spectrum (Draaisma, 2009). Asperger syndrome, one diagnosis, falls under the higher functioning side of the spectrum (Montgomery et al., 2016). High functioning refers to "[a]utistic people who [can] speak fluently, who [can] read and write, who [can] demonstrate self-awareness and insight into their own experiences, who [can] participate in higher education, have jobs, and live independently" (Sinclair, 2005, p. 6).

Media Selection and Data Collection and Analysis

We selected three TV shows featuring an autistic character—*The Good Doctor* (Shore, 2017), *Touch* (Kring,2012), and *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre, 2007)because teacher candidates cited them during discussions. In addition, we had watched them more than three times, which increased our insightful analysis of the portrayals of autism. Besides, their popularity and time gap made them appropriate for unearthing the content changes and possible effects on educators.

Environments mold people's behaviors and feelings, including attitudes, language, and stereotypes, and these factors influence people's perceptions and how neurotypicals interact with the autistic community (Draaisma, 2009; Sinclair, 2005). People, therefore, have predisposed knowledge of others based on a widely held but fixed and oversimplified picture of a particular person. Thematically analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) involved watching each TV show three or four times and recording images, actions, phrases, and scenes that depicted autism experiences. We coded data to identify instances of the actors' disability attitudes or stereotypes (e.g., shame, guilt, fear, or discomfort) shown in the images, verbal language, and body language (e.g., hand motions, pointing to an object, and facial expressions). We also considered actors' settings and language and how they interacted and related in these spaces to interpret educators' perceptions and bearings. Since language affects one's perception, emotions, and thoughts, we considered how, where, when, and what actors said to each other or themselves and how those messages could be perceived by neurotypical educators about an autistic character/student. Next, we discussed how each portrayal positively or negatively affects the perception of autism and its advantages and disadvantages. We observed how autism exists and is presented in TV shows, how often an autistic character is portrayed as a savant or deficient, and how they accessed opportunities compared to their neurotypical counterparts.

Findings

Thematic analyses of the three TV shows led to major perceptions: Autistic savant with a photographic memory, autistic dependent and burdensome, autistic emotionally detached and socially deficient, and autistic innocent and childlike.

Autistic Savant with Photographic Memory

The Good Doctor (2017) is a show about a brilliant surgical resident named Shaun Murphy who has autism. Shaun cites the loss of his older brother (and best friend) and his pet rabbit as reasons he became a doctor. He wanted to know how he could have helped his brother and pet rabbit. Throughout the show, Shaun is often portrayed as a visual thinker and learner. Shaun is working with a patient at times, and illustrations appear on the screen representing what Shaun is seeing (Gordon, 2017, 13:44). He often diagnoses a patient or determines a symptom's cause. It appears as if he has memorized pages of an anatomy textbook or simulation. These visualizations often allow Shaun to diagnose a patient or save a patient's life. Besides Shaun being a successful surgeon, he makes friends and has a girlfriend. Throughout the series, *The Good Doctor (2017)* has a hyper-positive portrayal of autism, even though not all autistic people are prosperous with careers and relationships. Shaun has some abilities that could be considered superhuman, which is what Shaun's portrayal could imply to viewers.

Conversely, the series *Touch* (2012) focuses on the relationship between an eleven-year-old boy named Jake and his father, Martin. Jake has autism and is mute. At the beginning of the series, Jake's inability to speak verbally causes communication issues between him and his father, and Martin desperately tries to understand him. However, Jake is fascinated with numbers, and Martin soon learns that this is how Jake communicates. Jake will write numbers repetitively in his journal, sometimes communicating by drawing numbers on his dad's hand or by bringing attention to objects associated with numbers. An example is in episode two of the series (Toynton, 2012). Jakes writes down a phone number, and Martin can trace it to find an address linked to it. This leads Martin to a pawnshop. When he arrives, a robbery happens. This phenomenon is explained when Martin later visits Arthur Teller, a professor with experience working with people gifted with numbers. Martin wants to learn from Teller how to communicate with his son and how he may have predicted the pawnshop robbery. Teller tells Martin the numbers are how Jake sees the universe. Teller explains:

It's all numbers to [Jake]. The past, the present, the future. He sees how they're all connected. . . . Sometimes when the numbers don't add up, it means that there's some cosmic pain that has to be healed, that your son feels, senses. Something unresolved, unfinished in the world. He sees the pain as numbers. Your job is to follow where it leads. (Toynton, 2012, 20:28)

This scene shows how Jake can predict the future and connections to the past, which Jake continues to do throughout the series.

An example of Jake's connecting to the past—another excellent example of the connections he can make with numbers—is when he draws attention to the numbers 318 in the pilot episode (Lawrence, 2012). Jake would escape from school several times to climb a cell tower at exactly 3:18. Jake's absence from school prompts an evaluation from Clea, a social worker. She would temporarily institutionalize Jake because she believed Martin could effectively communicate with or protect his son. Before Jake is institutionalized, he goes to a gas station with his dad. Jake gets out of the car to stand behind a school bus labeled "318." Later, while Clea plays at the institution with Jake, he puts popcorn kernels in groups to form numbers. Clea counts the popcorn kernels in each group and realizes Jake has written her mother's phone number in the popcorn (Lawrence, 2012, 30:42). While Jake is at the institution, Martin visits the cemetery where his wife, Jake's mom, is buried. Jake's mom had died in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. At her gravestone, Martin finds a firefighter badge numbered 318.

Later, Martin looks more closely at Jake's journal. He finds a set of numbers and realizes it is a phone number. He finds the address the number is linked to and sees it leads to Manhattan's famous Grand Central Terminal train station. Martin goes to the terminal at 3:18 to discover the numbers' meaning. He finds a clock in the terminal that displays the time over a payphone, and Martin tries to tell the man already using the payphone he is expecting a call at 3:18. An argument ensues when the man does not give up the phone, and both men get kicked out of the terminal. When Martin is back at home, he sees he has a missed call and one voicemail. He plays the voicemail and learns it was the firefighter who tried saving his wife during 9/11. During the voicemail, Martin hears his voice in the background and realizes he had argued with the firefighter at Grand Central Terminal.

While the voicemail is playing, the news comes on and shows a retired firefighter had pulled children out of a burning bus, saving their lives. Looking at the TV, Martin sees the man he had gotten into an argument with at Grand Central Terminal, as well as the same 318 bus that Jake had guided Martin to at the gas station.

The retired firefighter says he was on the way home and was at the right place at the right time. He adds, "If I hadn't missed my train, I wouldn't have been here. It's amazing how things work out" (Lawrence, 2012, 40:48). Somehow, Jake had connected a specific time and the firefighter who had tried to save his mom and a school bus to the number 318. Throughout the series, Jake makes other spectacular connections. It is not explained how Jake connects these numbers with events other than Arthur Teller's explanation in the second episode.

In this circumstance, Martin experiences communication problems with his son, Jake. However, Jake is using his power to communicate with his dad. Jake communicates by drawing attention to specific numbers, and Martin follows these numbers to understand Jake's message. Ironically, Martin's deficit was that he could not initially communicate with his son. This theme of communication gives a positive perception to neurotypical viewers, teaching them that autistic people can communicate in modalities different from talking. Contrastingly, while a fictitious portrayal of a savant, Jake's ability with numbers can still give viewers unrealistic perceptions. Jake can see and memorize the entire universe as sets of numbers. Not only does he see the universe in its current state, but he sees the past and future. This is a lot of knowledge for an eleven-year-old boy to contain.

The Big Bang Theory (2007) is a sitcom about the lives of Sheldon and Leonard, both physicists at the prestigious California Institute of Technology, and their intelligent friends Raj and Howard. The lead character Sheldon exhibits characteristics of Asperger syndrome. Sheldon gives detailed explanations. For example, in the pilot episode, Sheldon cites why he likes a specific sitting spot. He is astute and says he has an IQ of 187(Cendrowski, 2008, 9:58). He knows a wide range of topics depicted throughout the series. These topics include math, the sciences, engineering, coding, and several foreign languages. Additionally, Sheldon has obtained many degrees, including a Master of Science, Master of Art, Bachelor of Science, Doctorate, and Doctor of Science (Rick, 2011).

Autistic Emotionally Detached and Socially Deficient

Autistic characters in TV shows are socially deficient. They struggle socially, challenging them in their work and personal environments. Aside from his brilliance as a doctor, *The Good Doctor* (2017) also gives its audience a view of Shaun's personal life and challenges. Shaun is portrayed as struggling to maintain a relationship with intimate friends, acquaintances, and workmates mostly because of his social ineptness and emotionlessness, even when dealing with grave matters. In season three, Shaun pursues a relationship with a neurotypical colleague at the hospital. He often asks his colleagues for advice regarding this personal matter and others. Yet, when Shaun works independently on medical cases, he usually succeeds. This demonstrates that Shaun lacks social skills but is great at less socially demanding but more concrete tasks, such as diagnosing a patient. Thus, he cannot independently explore relationships, which have heavy social burdens. His neurotypical colleagues must help him achieve a relationship. This furthers the perception that autistic persons cannot be socially competent. This perception is strengthened when Shaun chooses his longtime friend and roommate Lea to support him at his father's deathbed instead of his girlfriend, Carly. Also, later in the season, Shaun seeks advice from Lea after asking for advice from Carly (Brown, 2020), causing tensions in his relationship. Additionally, throughout the show, Shaun is emotionally detached. When giving patients a serious diagnosis, he often does not give it lightly. While sometimes this does not affect the patient, other times, it does. Whether the patient reacts negatively or not, this tells the audience that Shaun lacks empathy. This emotional detachment affects Shaun's personal life as well. Shaun seems cold at his father's deathbed as he does not think his father deserves emotional comfort. Shaun's disposition here could be explained by his father's abuse in his youth, but it could also be another characteristic resulting from Shaun's autism.

In *Touch* (2012), Jake is deficient in social norms. This is most obviously conveyed by the fact that Jake is nonverbal. At the beginning of the series, Martin experiences communication problems with his son, who mainly speaks with numbers that Martin has trouble deciphering. His fascination with numbers leads Jake to escape from school, prompting an evaluation from Clea, the social worker, who would temporarily institutionalize Jake because she did not believe Martin could effectively communicate with or protect Jake. This action could help form viewers' perceptions by indicating that Jake cannot communicate. However, Jake can communicate, and he does so with his numbers. This shows that people who are nonverbal can still communicate. Additionally, Jake's muteness is one of the DMS-5 features of autistic people. Whereas communication problems between Jake and Martin are one of the reasons Clea temporarily institutionalizes Jake, Jake's muteness contrasts with his superhuman ability to see the connections of the universe with numbers. His socially deficient qualities counter his savant qualities.

Upon the intervention by neurotypical Clea and Martin, Jake, as an autistic individual, is brought into the limelight, and his powers and endeavors are tapped. So, it is ironic that he may be intelligent but helpless because of his social deficit. This notion could cause viewers to see autism as a deficit, despite Jake's superhuman and genius qualities.

Furthermore, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) constructs Sheldon as socially defective and thus finds comfort in friends that mirror his social traits. Most of his friends are geniuses, yet geeky and awkward, like him. While Sheldon is not inferior or awkward because of his friends, he self-isolates by surrounding himself only with similar people. The fact that he does not have many friends outside of the introvert group makes it seem as if Sheldon is uncomfortable with making new friends, which is a socially demanding task. Some of his behaviorisms stay consistent throughout the series, including his resistance to change. Throughout the series, he adheres to traditions, such as knocking on someone's door three times and then saying the person's name. He will do this repeatedly until they answer. Such actions can make viewers perceive him as annoying. Also, Sheldon is constructed as one who is inflexible. In the pilot episode, when Sheldon and his roommate Leonard invite their new neighbor, Penny, over, she sits in Sheldon's spot on the couch, making him tight (Cendrowski, 2011). He explains why he likes that specific spot instead of asking Amy to move. If this is not socially deficient, it is undoubtedly socially odd.

Often, Sheldon is apathetic. He does not get into a relationship until well into his adult life. Sheldon's girlfriend, Amy, is also intelligent and geeky. Even then, it takes Sheldon a long time to ask her to be his girlfriend. After several other men show interest in her, Sheldon realizes he must ask Amy out if he does not want her to be with someone else. Sheldon asks Amy to be his girlfriend while she is on a date with another guy, and she accepts (Cendrowski, 2011). Sheldon's inappropriate behavior or getting into a relationship with someone similar can also be attributed to his social deficits. Sheldon's trying to date someone like Amy could be how he copes with pursuing a socially demanding task. Some of his abnormal traits stay consistent during the series' twelve seasons. For instance, Sheldon reveals again how he is rigid. Amy, now his wife, gets a makeover. Sheldon is upset by this action, saying, "Amy is the one constant that I can count on, and now she is changing" (Cendrowski, 2019, 13:03). This message seems rude to Amy, who thought Sheldon would like her new look. Sheldon's lack of politeness, which also relates to his total honesty, is another social deficit. Besides being extremely honest, Sheldon does not like to be touched (haphephobia) because of his phobia of germs. Haphephobia can be considered social deficits as they are not aligned with the behaviorisms of a neurotypical person. Contrastingly, some of his early behaviorisms are curbed by the last season. For example, Sheldon shows more empathy toward his friends and is less sensitive to touch.

Autistic Innocent and Childlike

The three TV shows portray autistic characters as innocent and childlike. In *The Good Doctor* (2017), Shaun depends on his colleagues and bosses to advocate for his job as a surgeon at a hospital. They argue that despite his lack of empathy or emotion, his skills speak for themselves. This was the case when Dr. Glassman advocated in the pilot episode for Shaun to get a job at St. Bonaventure Hospital (Gordon, 2017). Shaun was late to his interview with the hospital's board, but because he was smart and would be a great surgeon, Dr. Glassman convinced the board to wait for him. Also, Shaun seeks advice from his colleagues about a famous patient who wants to share his story with the world on her platform. Shaun immediately gets Lea's advice after listening to his girlfriend, Carly (Brown, 2020), which causes tension in his relationship. Carly vents about it to a mutual colleague (Brown, 2020, 46:40):

CARLY: Shaun lied to me about having lunch with Lea.
COLLEAGUE: No, he didn't. Shaun is incapable of deceit. He must have genuinely thought that you wouldn't mind.
CARLY: Well, then he is completely tone-deaf and insensitive, which are not better qualities in a boyfriend.
COLLEAGUE: True. But not exactly unanticipated when you get into a relationship with Shaun.

In this example, Shaun is portrayed as incapable of lying, an assumption that autistic people can neither lie nor keep secrets.

The series *Touch* (2012) has Jake lead his father to cataclysmic events through numbers. While it seems like Jake is not innocent, as he knows about various events around the world, he is still treated like a child. The most obvious example is how his father Martin finds the connection between Jake's numbers. Jake is not usually present when Martin is following the numbers that Jake has laid out for him. Also, when Clea is trying to institutionalize Jake because he cannot communicate effectively with his father, Clea cites Jake's safety.

In *The Big Bang Theory* (2007), Sheldon is often portrayed as childlike despite his vast knowledge and many degrees. He is a successful scientist who lives with a roommate. Also, the length of time Sheldon goes without being in a relationship makes it seem that he is not emotionally intelligent or mature enough to be in one. Also, he is passionate

about video games, which can seem childlike. Finally, his friends treat him like a child. When he is uncomfortable and reaches out to them for help, they sometimes comedically take on a parenting role.

Autistic Dependent and Burdensome

In all three TV shows, the autistic characters depend on others. In *The Good Doctor* (2017), Shaun depends on his colleagues. They often give Shaun advice regarding friendships, relationships, and work-related issues. Also, Shaun relies on his colleagues to advocate for his place at work. If patients do not want Shaun as their doctor because of his autism or the way he seems emotionally detached, his colleagues and bosses often stand up for him. For example, after losing his brother Steve, Shaun befriended Dr. Aaron Glassman, who would become a vital mentor and advocate of Shaun's medical journey to become a doctor. In the pilot episode, Shaun is running late to his resident surgical interview at St. Bonaventure Hospital, where Dr. Glassman is president. As the hospital board waits for Shaun to arrive, Dr. Glassman convinces them to stay(Gordon, 2017). This theme of Dr. Glassman and Shaun's other colleagues and bosses advocating and defending Shaun is prevalent throughout the show.

In *The Big Bang Theory* (2007), Sheldon relies upon his friends. He enjoys being around others who are like him. His roommate Leonard is a smart scientist like himself, and his friends and partner are also awkward yet smart geniuses. He often asks them for help in uncomfortable situations. Lastly, in *Touch* (2012), Jake is a burden to his father. Atthe beginning of the series, his communication issues with his dad almost cause Martin to lose custody. Also, when Martin is following the numbers that Jake gives him, he can be put in dangerous or traumatic situations.

Discussion

As it relates to educators' perceptions of autistic learners, the three TV shows have led to new interpretations of the representation of autism—autistic savant with a photographic memory, autistic dependent and burdensome, autistic emotionally detached and socially deficient, and autistic innocent and childlike. The savant stereotype is prevalent in each TV show, making the plots convoluted and exciting. Autistic characters are portrayed with super-human traits; geniuses who figure out things that neurotypical people cannot easily comprehend. The characters exhibit a high degree of brilliance in their tasks, doing extraordinary things through their savant skills coupled with photographic memories. The savant stereotype is often positive, but it gives an unrealistic perception to viewers. Unlike the freak shows that construct disabled people as monsters and victims of circumstances (Siebers, 2008), the focus on savantism enables these TV shows to advance the hero stereotype that is often not linked to disabled people. Even so, the palatability of the hero stereotype creates curiosity in viewers and challenges their deficit views of autistic people. Despite creating disability awareness, in the hero depiction also lies the danger of spreading the supercrip stereotype. Supercripsare individuals who overcome disability and become more "normal" and accepted in mainstream society (Schalk, 2016). Supercrip stereotypes propagate overcoming narratives, a dangerous proposition for the autism community considering that less than a third of the population have savant abilities. Whereas savant qualities are worth celebrating, viewers should be cognizant of the reality that many autistic people do not have savantism. Having a balanced perspective of the realities is important for educators. This can be achieved when educators use the social model of disability to analyze media content critically (Haller, 2010). Siebers (2008, p. 5) acknowledges that the only way for disability studies to remain relevant is "to account for both the negative and positive valances of disability, to resist the negative by advocating the positive and resist the positive by acknowledging the negative" but always aim to empower disabled people.

The vivacious construction of characters with Asperger syndrome as super geniuses is tamed by their portrayal as incapable of managing their lives and thus dependent on nondisabled people for survival. Throughout the three TV shows, autistic characters are portrayed over-relying on their families, friends, and co-workers and hence stressful to them. Neurotypical viewers are made to perceive their potential but also how burdensome they are. This perception can have devastating effects on neurotypical educators. Neurotypical educators and peers who form this perception may not want to relate with autistic learners because they may think it will be a greater risk to support in regular schools or general classrooms (Danforth, 2014; Siebers, 2008; Sinclair, 2005). The belief that disabled bodies are damaged even though all human bodies are "feeble and infinite" (Siebers, 2008, p. 7) is the basis of historical exclusions of disabled people and today segregation of autistic learners in schools (Danforth, 2014). Though possible, unfortunately, changing this deficit perspective of autistic people is not easy. Siebers (2008) mentions, "[d]isability marks the last frontier of unquestioned inferiority because the preference of able-bodiedness [and able-mindedness] makes it extremely difficult to embrace disabled people and to recognize their unnecessary and violent exclusion from society" (p. 6). Then disabled people and allies must challenge hegemonic beliefs perpetuated by the media (Haller, 2010) and practiced by neurotypicals (Brown, 2011; Siebers, 2008; Sinclair, 2005).

Moreover, TV shows advance the social ineptness stereotype. They portray autistic people as lacking emotional connections with nondisabled people. Most autistic characters struggle socially; however, by focusing on the social deficit as the only weakness of autistic people, the media spotlight that not only are their autistic characters different, but they are different in ways resulting in negative consequences. This portrayal of autistic characters as geniuses but socially deficient and helpless and therefore in need of rescue by neurotypicals is a way of canceling their agency and perpetuating the helplessness stereotype (Danforth, 2014; Sinclair, 2005). Besides, this process of elevation and minimization of autistic people is a common perspective that continues to feed into low expectations and mistreatment of autistic learners (Sinclair, 2005). Misrepresentations of autistic characters may tell educators that real autistic learners cannot make emotional connections with others, which is false (Sinclair, 2005).

Also, the TV shows portray autistic characters as socially faulty and people who adhere to traditions and resists change. The main consequence is viewers may perceive that everyone is somehow on the autism spectrum or that no spectrum exists (Sinclair, 2005). This also spreads the stereotype of autistic people being isolated (Holton, 2013). Also, this could give neurotypical viewers the false perception that autistic people cannot make friends with those who are much different from them, such as an interabled friendship. This limits the opportunity of autistic characters in the media and autistic people in reality to make friends. The slight positive behaviors that some characters acquire is a fine line between that and the misconception that autism (and its traits) can be cured (Conn & Bhugra, 2012), a negative perspective opposed by the disability rights activists (Siebers, 2008; Sinclair, 2005).

Furthermore, the TV shows fall victim to the stereotype of autistic people needing neurotypical advocates. This way, they are infantilized. Poe and Moseley (2016) argue that even savants cannot take care of themselves in the media and need a nondisabled person to advocate for their place in society. This stereotype gives the false perception that every autistic person is incapable of being independent. Additionally, the stereotype leads viewers to believe it takes a neurotypical person to enable an autistic person to succeed. The TV shows also promote the stereotype that autistic people are innocent and do not lie. This innocent agenda imprisons autistic people as they are expected to be meek and not question any practices. Lies are wrong and immoral (DePaulo, 2004), but there are different types of deceptions (e.g., real, white, or grey lies), and depending on the context, a lie can harmorheal (Bryant, 2008). Like everyone else, autistic people are predisposed to lie, and those who believe they do not lie may react badly to them. The innocence perspective also encourages nondisabled abuse of autistic people. The false stereotype that autistic people are child-like and innocent gives the audience the notion that they can trust whatever autistic people say. Although untrue, this portrays autistic people as an angel- or baby-like and therefore trustworthy. While shielding autistic people from false claims, this form of depersonalization risks perpetuating aggressions against autistic people (Sinclair, 2005).

Conclusions

Media are critical for edutainment, play a vital role in shaping society's beliefs and attitudes, and influence teachers' and autistic learners' relationships. Although TV shows contribute significantly to challenging the traditional deficit view of autistic people, they also posit danger in inculcating the deficit notions that have long been held within the media industry that has been against empowering disabled people. The media (in) advertently promote autism mythologies when media forms misrepresent or oversell autistic qualities. Considering the media instituted historical marginalization of disabled people, teacher educators and teacher candidates must use the social model of disability to analyze media autistic content to avoid perpetuating the norms that disadvantage autistic learners. Addressing historical injustices perpetuated by the media, as in freak shows, demands educators' vigilance to avoid being corrupted by the contemporary media fallacies that focus on the superhuman abilities of autistic individuals. Educators' knowledge of these fallacies can help educators institute appropriate practices to challenge dehumanizing school norms (e.g., ability-based segregation).

This study addresses the influences of TV shows on educators' perceptions and the consequences of these perceptions on autistic learners. Still, it has some limitations because it was guided by our own experiences to analyze only specific series and episodes of the (ongoing) three TV shows with characters with no lived autism experiences to understand possible educators' perceptions. Then, future studies with real educators should focus on different media sources to discern how the portrayal of autistic people affects the perception of educators of autistic individuals as a whole. Still, our findings provide insiders knowledge of the benefits and dangers of popular TV shows and the need to use the social model of disability studies in challenging educators knowing of autism.

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