

Discourse of Detachment? Investigating Media Representations of Autism in the Irish Print Media

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INTRODUCTION

“Severe”, “suffers”, “symptoms”, “treatment”, “cure”, “epidemic”: now more than ever in these trying times, these are scary words. They might evoke fear, uncertainty, maybe even despair. It might surprise you to hear what these words have in common – in successive international media discourse studies, each of these terms have been found to be closely linked to media coverage of autism, a spectrum of diverse neurodevelopmental conditions that affect sensory processing and interpersonal communication. Though understandings of autism as a positive identity worthy of celebration have gained ground in recent years, research shows that medicalised understandings of autism as a disorder and a tragedy continue to persevere in journalistic content. In April 2019, Ireland’s leading autism advocacy organisation AsIAM released the results of a survey capturing the Irish public’s perceptions of autism. This study was encouraging in that it reflected widespread support towards the inclusion of autistic people in every aspect of Irish society; however, many people who responded to this same survey indicated a lack of confidence in their understanding of autism and what really jumped off the page for me was that 37% believed the Irish media doesn’t represent autism authentically while just as many again weren’t sure. Having read this, I was instantly convinced that there was a story to be told behind these findings and that there could well be some kind of correlation between media representations of autism and this perceived gap in the broader community’s understanding of the condition. Astounded by the absence of published academic research around the Irish context of autism in media discourse, the present research sought to investigate constructions of autism and autistic people in the Irish print media and, through this analysis, determine to what extent these representations may be deemed reliable, accurate and informative.

METHODOLOGIES

To address these research questions, a body of texts from two representative Irish newspaper publications (*The Irish Times* and *The Daily Irish Mail*) was assembled comprising all articles from the 31st January 2018 – 31st January 2019 mentioning “autism”, “autistic” or “Asperger” (a now diagnostically defunct variant of autism that is nevertheless still frequently used as a descriptor). A three-layered approach was taken to unpacking the linguistic significance of this dataset: firstly, quantitative variables such as word frequencies and keywords in context were examined across the sample as a whole (117 articles per newspaper). Secondly, a randomly selected sub-sample of 30 articles per newspaper was scrutinised in terms of qualitative content patterns and referential weighting (i.e. which groups within society are providing information, statements and interviews in coverage around autism). Finally, the research was enriched by a comparative dimension provided by content analysis of two narratively identical articles from both publications.

FINDINGS

1. Understandings of Autism: Still Medical

Consistent with the existing body of research around autism in the media, medicalised notions of autism continue to form the basis of how it is portrayed in mainstream newspapers. This was seen right off the bat with respect to the most common words occurring directly before or directly after each of the three keywords (“autism”, “autistic” or “Asperger”), where clinical terminology such as “epidemic” and “symptoms” were salient. These pathological word choices were also reflected within the qualitative aspects of the analysis. All of this points towards a continued understanding of autism as a medical disorder as opposed to a neurological identity of both personal and societal value defined by difference rather than deficit. The reason for this became apparent to me when I examined referential weighting in my sample – in other words, who was providing information or statements to articles that featured autism or autistic people. In 16% of the Irish Times cross-section I extracted and then 20% for the Daily Irish Mail, these sources were academic or medical professionals - a striking contrast to the input from autistic people themselves, which stands at just 8% in the Irish Times cross-section and 10% in the Daily Irish Mail.

The phenomenon I believe best explains this based on my research is the trickling down of the professional community’s quite clinical linguistic inclinations to parents who bring their children to these professionals for

diagnosis and often inherit their subject-specific terminology in the process of consulting them about their autistic child. As both parents and professionals were found to be prominent informational contributors to the representations depicted in my sample, it comes as no surprise that these detached and clinical descriptors are then reflected in journalists' own vocabulary, which can be seen in frequencies of words such as "symptoms", "suffers" and "occur". This is a fascinating instance of how an elite community's chosen vocabulary exercises influence on the perceptions of the broader community and how the connotative value of these problematic word choices filter down the representative "food chain", so to speak before soaking into the final, most populous layer of society: which is of course the general public.

2. Parental Perspectives of Autistic People – Othering Through Mothering?

The predominant embodiment of autism was overwhelmingly weighted towards children in both publications, in fact to the point where it was almost exclusive and this was also reflected thematically in the prominence of narratives centred around domains of the child such as education. Children are traditionally conceived of by society as vulnerable, relatively powerless individuals who must be protected by the powerful and so this 'Peter Pan'-style framing of what is a lifelong condition that just as many adults live with as children both asserts and reinforces autistic people's perceived role as subordinates within the current social order.

In other words, experiential accounts in the first-person or direct citations from individuals who identify as autistic fall by the wayside in both publications in favour of mostly professional perspectives in the case of the Irish Times and mostly familial perspectives in the case of the Daily Irish Mail. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the humanising potential of parental experiences – parents of autistic children are closer to the day-to-day lived experience of autistic people than most other subsets of society and can provide helpful insight that contributes towards demystifying autism by giving the identity the names and faces of real people and bringing the autistic individual closer to the source of the narrative. However, experiencing autism through the parental gaze – one which inevitably draw the eye downwards to the level of the child – further reinforces both the underrepresented and subordinate status of autistic adults and their discursive distance from what is accepted as "normal" by these institutions, and by extension, society.

3. Vulnerable Children, Dangerous Adults?

The most intriguing pattern I noticed but hadn't expected to come by in my analysis came up in the crime category, where there was an unmistakable dichotomy between the portrayal of autistic children on the one hand as vulnerable, helpless victims and autistic adults as violent, dangerous criminals on the other hand. While autistic adults were almost completely absent from this sample as victims of crimes and autistic children instead dominated these victim narratives, the already remarkably small amount of autistic adults seen throughout the entire sample overall was overwhelmingly concentrated within the crime category as opposed to other relevant categories such as employment, health and homelessness and what's more, they appeared within these crime narratives almost exclusively as perpetrators. In reality, studies have shown that autistic people are more likely to fall victim to crime than commit crime, so this skewed representation of autistic adults that places them as an adversarial force to social order acts as another subtle "othering" mechanism which is amplified by the equation of this identity with mental instability and the misuse of the 'autism' label to explain criminal behaviour. Rather than including the voices of autistic adults who form the law-abiding majority of this demographic, a dominating construction of autistic adults as deviants who are distant from the accepted social order takes shape which seems to suggest the destruction autistic adults are capable of when given power, thereby rationalising power relations structures that promote autistic people's status as infantile subordinates.

However, what was even more telling was that the 'autism' label was actively adopted by some of the autistic perpetrators themselves as the cause for their behaviour and justification for escaping legal reprimand. I think this serves as fascinating evidence of how the power relations structures that media institutions assign certain minority groups can be internalised by these same groups, in this case by representing autism not only as a medical disorder, but also providing it with connotations of social disorder and deviance from accepted behaviour, such as crime. This all suggests that media representations of autism not only have a significant top-down influence on society, but also permeates autistic people's own self-image in a potentially harmful way.

4. Detached Diversity

The Daily Irish Mail showed heavy reliance on sensationalised, emotive narratives centred around the family unit with autism largely framed as providing as an element of tragedy in its disruption of what is perceived as normal family life. However, a rhetoric of othering is also amplified in the Irish Times, even if this is done in a much subtler way. Firstly, the frequency of the word “like” led me to uncover substantial reliance on metaphor which build on the notion of autism as a disruptive force within society. Some examples of this include “like an alarm”, “like an outsider” and “like an experiment that succeeds”. A disproportionate thematic focus on infrastructure and access to public services was also identified at a qualitative level where the public domain reigns supreme and autism is described with a depersonalised, dispassionate voice - a “discourse of detachment”

While public service narratives are both positive and important in that they provide a bird’s-eye view of barriers, injustices and disparities facing autistic people and their families and hence raise awareness of these very real issues, the Irish Times disproportionate focus on research results and data-based insights not only further medicalises notions of autism, but also ‘abstractifies’ the concept by rendering it an issue of infrastructure and autistic people a faceless statistic, all while tangible autistic individuals and their crucial context provided by human interest stories centred around the lived experience of autism remain either peripheral or entirely absent from the narrative. On the surface, this informational saturation may seem like a more benign alternative to the Daily Irish Mail’s more emotive and sensationalised approach to framing autism. However, by representing autism much more prominently through facts and figures than through the faces and stories of real autistic people, an alienating “discourse of detachment” as I’ve called it takes form which can have just as alienating an effect when considering the gap in public understanding of autistic people.

CONCLUSION

Each of these points have one common thread that runs through them, which is that voices from the autistic community are described almost exclusively in terms of their relationship with the non-autistic community rather than on their own terms. I have argued that this is a very subtle version of an “us” vs “them” discourse that situates autistic people as contrary to social order and sees them relegated to an infantile, subordinate role in the societal hierarchy. This is mostly done through the consistent denial of agency and is damaging and debilitating on many levels, from public conceptions or misconceptions penetrating right down to the autistic community’s own self-image. But how can media institutions do better for autistic people and introduce balance to their coverage of autism? A number of possibilities come to mind: firstly, integrated training for journalists centred around interpersonal contact with autistic people would go a long way. One such model proposed by Shawn Burns would be a good starting point and this study can be accessed through the link provided below.

Secondly, a very simple and very effective step in the right direction would be to use AsIAM’s media toolkit as a point of reference when reporting on autism or autistic people as it provides a useful overview of respectful language choices and is freely accessible to the general public (link included below). However, it is particularly imperative that autistic people are made more visible in the media by providing them with a platform to voice their own stories on their own terms. This means more autistic bylines, more human-interest stories, more interviews and experiential account and just generally more direct input. A nuanced, cross-community approach such as this would be in my opinion most effective in dismantling stereotypes around autism and challenging the power relations structures presented to us by media institutions. A new inclusive, social responsibility model in how autism is approached by the mainstream media is the way forward for Irish journalism and if even some of these recommendations are followed, I think this could be a conceivably imminent reality.

Thank you for taking an interest in my research and please do not hesitate to contact me via email (16155858@studentmail.ul.ie) with any questions or comments.

LINKS

Burns, S. (2016) ‘Diversity and Journalism Pedagogy: Exploring News Media Representation of Disability’, *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 71(2), 220-230, available: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1077695815598436> [accessed 16 Apr 2019].

AsIAM (2019) *Autism & Language – What’s the Best Word?* [online], AsIAM.ie, available: <https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Autism-Language.pdf> [accessed 10 Nov 2019].