

Ella Lamkin, Ashton Howard, and Lauren Mist

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Access Histories, Access Futures: Exploring Mental Illness Representation Through the Media

Introduction

If cartoons were a person's only source of information, they would be led to believe that gravity doesn't work until you look down, a pair of glasses and a fake mustache make the perfect disguise, and being flattened by an anvil falling from the sky is just an everyday inconvenience. Of course learning entirely from cartoon logic is clearly an extreme, but exposure to television tropes and stereotypes actually can lead to misconceptions and potentially harmful beliefs. When people are repetitively exposed to the same ideas and images, they can start to internalize them, especially when there is a lack of any other representation.

One very prevalent area of misrepresentation is in the portrayal of mental illness in media. Although around 23.1% of people in the US were found to have some form of mental illness, there is a great lack of mental illness representation in the media (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). In fact Smith et al. (2019) found that only 7% of television characters have any sort of mental illness and the characters that do have a mental illness often fall into

stereotypical categories that do not represent the actual wide range of mental illnesses and their symptoms. Having a wide range of representation gives viewers a better understanding of the world around them, reduces misconceptions, and supports inclusivity. Diverse and accurate representation also helps to give people characters that they can relate to and feel understood by. Some current television shows are striving to improve representation of characters with mental illnesses, but there are still many that fall short. Therefore in this study we aimed to assess the portrayal of characters with mental illnesses in popular television shows and analyze the possible effects of these portrayals.

Methods

The mental illnesses analyzed in this study were dyslexia, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and autism spectrum disorder. For each mental illness, two popular television shows were selected, one portraying a character diagnosed with that mental illness and one with a character that is not explicitly diagnosed, but is otherwise implied to have that mental illness. We watched an episode, or multiple if necessary, of each show and kept track of the symptoms represented throughout. We also took into account other reviews of the show and common trends of misrepresentation of each mental illness to assess the quality of representation in each show. This assessment allowed us to both compare the representation in shows portraying the same mental illness and look at the differences in how different mental illnesses are portrayed.

Results

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a form of learning disability defined by the DSM-5-TR as having learning difficulties caused by problems with accurate and/or fluent word recognition, poor spelling abilities and poor decoding (2022). When it comes to media portraying dyslexia, I found very limited or niche portyals. However, two television shows, *The Artful Dodger* and *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, did work to portray Dyslexia in various ways.

The Artful Dodger

The Artful Dodger is a spin off television series on HULU and Disney + based on the novel *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens. The show follows the character Jack Dawkins after he leaves his days of crime pick-pocketing and becomes a surgeon. However, he portrays symptoms of dyslexia at the same time. According to the Mayo Clinic (2022), dyslexia symptoms in teens and adults include:

1. Difficulty reading (including when aloud)
2. Slow and labor-intensive reading and writing
3. Problems with spelling
4. Avoiding activities that involve reading
5. Mispronouncing names or words, as well as retrieving words
6. Spending an unusually long time completing tasks that involve reading or writing
7. Difficulty summarizing a story
8. Trouble learning a foreign language

9. Difficulty doing math word problems

Out of these listed symptoms, Jack Dawkins clearly portrays difficulty reading, in addition to avoiding activities that involve reading. Other symptoms he depicts as listed by the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity (n.d.), may include great effort when trying to read despite the development of the reading skills. In some ways he may also fit the symptom of concern that his peers (especially in the hospital setting) think he is dumb (Shaywitz, n.d.).

These are portrayed in various ways throughout the series. For instance, Jack Dawkins often hides his difficulty with reading because of the backlash he would receive as a surgeon. This can be assumed out of concern that people might find him not as qualified of a surgeon as the others, and ruin his reputation. As a result, he avoids reading in various ways and uses excuses to get the other main character (Lady Belle) to read to him from a textbook so he can learn new surgeries (*The Artful Dodger*, 2023). However, this is not because he does not know how to read, but rather because of the difficulty he has reading despite the great effort he likely put in to become a surgeon. At one point in the show he gets into an argument with Lady Belle due to the reveal of his poor reading skills. When she brings up the fact that he does not know how to read, he snaps back stating: “I can read... just not very well. Words swirl on the page for me” (“The Stitch Up,” *The Artful Dodger*, S1E4, 2023).

This specific scene got a lot of attention for its representation of learning disabilities despite it not being explicitly stated as being dyslexia. Many viewers and fans of the show expressed their ability to relate to Jack Dawkins especially in this scene where he shows vulnerability and advocating for himself that he can in fact read despite not being very good at it. One way this is demonstrated is through a TikTok where someone posted this clip and stated that they believe he may be dyslexic (👤Sara👤, 2024). Comments under this post stated similar

thoughts with one commenting, “Even unconfirmed, this would be outstanding representation for learning disabilities, especially dyslexia, and it makes my heart happy” (Aerial, 2024), In addition to another comment expressing their personal relation by stating, “as a dyslexic I get it. “I CAN read” just not well” (Alexander, 2024).

While this is the main scene that got people’s attention of this representation of dyslexia, I also think it is important to focus on the strengths that are often associated with dyslexia as listed on the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity website (n.d.). These are listed as such:

1. Maintaining strengths noted during school-age years
2. Has a high capacity to learn
3. Shows noticeable improvement when given additional time on multiple-choice examinations
4. Demonstrates excellence when focused on a highly specialized area, such as medicine, law, public policy, finance, architecture or basic science
5. Excellent writing skills if the focus is on content, not spelling
6. Highly articulate when expressing ideas and feelings
7. Exceptional empathy and warmth
8. Successful in areas not dependent on rote memory
9. A talent for high-level conceptualization and the ability to come up with original insights
10. Inclination to think outside the box and see the big picture
11. Noticeably resilient and able to adapt

Jack Dawkins exhibits several of these characteristics. Firstly, he is a surgeon which demonstrates his excellence in the specialized area of medicine. As a result, he is able to think

outside the box and articulate when expressing ideas on the spot that have to do with procedures that are rare, or have never been done before. This also alludes to being able to adapt and having a high capacity to learn.

Other points of consideration when taking this show into account is that not every diagnosis of dyslexia is the same. With Jack Dawkins, he actually exhibits the opposite of some of these symptoms. One prime example is the symptom that one rarely has a fast response in conversations. Jack Dawkins holds a reputation of fast comebacks and excuses to hide his past of criminal acts. Therefore demonstrating that just because he might have dyslexia does not mean that he has to have every symptom or that it looks the same for everyone with a dyslexia diagnosis. Another form of this statement is that Jack Dawkins exhibits a symptom that is actually listed as a strength but for second graders to high schoolers. He portrays the high level of understanding when something is read to him and is again demonstrated through the scenes of Lady Belle reading textbooks to him so he can efficiently perform surgeries.

Overall, the portrayal of dyslexia in this television series seems to be relatively accurate considering factors such as the time period this is supposed to be set in (1850s), as well as the fact that it is never explicitly stated that he has dyslexia. However, turning to the fanbase of this show, you can clearly see the overwhelming number of people who seem to relate to his character through his dyslexia. Many people, including those who hold this diagnosis or identity, have shared their excitement to see a character who seems to hold symptoms of dyslexia that they are able to relate to personally.

Percy Jackson and the Olympians

Percy Jackson and the Olympians is a show available to watch on Disney+ and is also based on a book series known as Percy Jackson. In this show they are more explicit with Percy

Jackson having dyslexia and gives the explanation of the cause being due to him being a demigod. Nonetheless, he does not find out about this until later on in the second episode. Percy Jackson is 12 in the show and therefore falls on the cusp of the school aged and teen age groups.

Symptoms in the school aged group as described by the Mayo Clinic (2022) include:

1. Reading well below the expected level for age
2. Problems processing and understanding what is heard
3. Difficulty finding the right word or forming answers to questions
4. Problems remembering the sequence of things
5. Difficulty seeing (and occasionally hearing) similarities and differences in letters and words
6. Inability to sound out the pronunciation of an unfamiliar word
7. Difficulty spelling
8. Spending an unusually long time completing tasks that involve reading or writing
9. Avoiding activities that involve reading

While the Mayo Clinic (2022) portrays the teen age group symptoms as:

1. Difficulty reading, including reading aloud
2. Slow and labor-intensive reading and writing
3. Problems spelling
4. Avoiding activities that involve reading
5. Mispronouncing names or words, or problems retrieving words
6. Spending an unusually long time completing tasks that involve reading or writing
7. Difficulty summarizing a story
8. Trouble learning a foreign language

9. Difficulty doing math word problems

However, Percy Jackson best fits the experiences in the school and life category on the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity (n.d.) listed as:

1. Trouble remembering dates, names, telephone numbers, random lists
2. Struggles to finish tests on time
3. Extreme difficulty learning a foreign language
4. Poor spelling
5. Messy handwriting
6. Low self-esteem that may not be immediately visible

In the show, Percy Jackson does not know that he has dyslexia or is a demigod until the end of the first episode. The prime symptom of dyslexia that is presented in the first episode is the low self-esteem that may not be immediately visible. Throughout the first episode there are several times where Percy experiences feelings of being different whether that was because of the girl in his class calling him “special” or him feeling like he is always to blame despite trying his best. There is also a scene where Percy starts yelling during a conversation with his mom about how he is broken and says the quote, “There is something wrong with my brain” (“I Become Supreme Lord of the Bathroom,” *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, Season 1, Episode 1, 2023). Once it is discovered that he is a demigod and it is explained that dyslexia (and ADHD although that is not being explored in this analysis) are two side effects of being a demigod, other side effects start becoming more clear. For instance, having trouble learning a foreign language is one explanation for why all demigods have dyslexia because of the inability to read ancient Greek when that is part of their identity (*Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, 2023).

Aside from this, Percy Jackson also displays some strengths with his dyslexia diagnosis with the main strength being his excellent thinking skills in terms of imagination. He may have some struggles when it comes to words, but with his very creative imagination he turned to sketching the things he saw that he thought he was imagining such as monster looking things prior to knowing he was a demigod (“I Become Supreme Lord of the Bathroom,” *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, Season 1, Episode 1, 2023).

Once again, I think that this show did very well at portraying dyslexia. Turning to the fanbase of the show, there is an overwhelmingly positive reaction to this portrayal of dyslexia seen in the film. One creator on youtube even went through several clips that she felt she could relate to as someone who holds the diagnosis of dyslexia herself (Griebelbauer, A., 2024). As a result, although I myself am not diagnosed with dyslexia, being able to turn and see how positive this representation has been for others makes me believe that they did a very good job at representing dyslexia in an accurate way.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a disorder characterized by lasting symptoms following a traumatic event. It can present itself differently for each person, but to be diagnosed they must have at least one re-experiencing symptom, one avoidance symptom, two arousal and reactivity symptoms, and two cognition and mood symptoms for at least 1 month (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, n.d.). PTSD is one of the more commonly portrayed mental illnesses in media, but characters with this disorder frequently fall victim to stereotypes that perpetuate a negative stigma that surrounds the disorder (Smith et al., 2019). The two shows analyzed in this study that portray characters with PTSD were *Barry* and *You're the Worst*.

Barry

Barry is a comedy drama that follows the story of a veteran that became a hit man, but is looking to escape his past and become an actor. Despite his attempts to move forward, he is haunted by the trauma of his criminal past both through an ongoing mental and emotional turmoil and run-ins with characters that followed him to his new life. Although it is never explicitly stated that Barry has PTSD, it is frequently implied throughout the show as he struggles with past traumatic events and experiences many symptoms indicative of PTSD.

In the first two episodes it is clear that Barry tries to separate himself from the trauma that he has experienced both physically and emotionally. He tries to distance himself from Fuches who is pushing him to continue to be a hit man and in multiple scenes he quickly diverts focus away from topics that remind him of his past trauma. He is also frequently on edge, loses concentration, has aggressive outbursts, and has flashbacks related to traumatic events (*Barry*, S1 E1 & E2, 2018). These symptoms only intensify throughout the show, especially as he falls back into a cycle of violence and guilt. For example, in season 2 episode 2 he is seen dissociating and experiencing a flashback to his experience as a sniper in the military which provides a lot of shame for Barry as he no longer wants to be seen as a violent person (*Barry*, S2E2, 2019). Although *Barry* is also a comedic show, the depiction of Barry's struggles to cope with his trauma and the dark dramatic scenes show a side of PTSD that some may find to be a negative portrayal while others argue that it is a realistic portrayal that helps people feel more understood.

With disorders like PTSD it can be difficult to balance showing the dark reality that can be true for some people with this mental illness without being insensitive or progressing a negative stigma around the disorder. Barry is a very conflicted character and although he tries to avoid falling into habits of violence, he continuously fails to do so. These violent depictions go

against the guidelines for portraying PTSD in media written by the U.S. Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD (n.d.), as they recommend not portraying people with PTSD as violent since this can stigmatize the disorder. But as Milici (2022) stated in her review, for some people with PTSD, the dark and honest struggles that are portrayed in Barry “offer... a way to make sense of our pain, rather than just display it as something hopeless and never-ending”. So, although Barry does not distance itself from the common association of PTSD with veterans, violence, and nightmares, there are a lot of positive reviews like the one from Milici (2022) that feel that the show does a good job of portraying the realities of the disorder in a way that is relatable and comforting.

You're the Worst

You're the Worst is a comedy drama that follows the unusual romance of Jimmy and Gretchen, two people who have an extremely negative perspective on the idea of relationships. Jimmy and Gretchen do not have PTSD, but Edgar, the couple's roommate, is a veteran that is explicitly stated to struggle with PTSD.

Edgar is one of the few truly likeable characters in the show and is often seen as a contrast to the cruelties of Jimmy and Gretchen, with some jokes being made about his disorder and a few references to his struggles to cope. But in season 3 episode 5, the viewers truly get a look into the harsh realities of Edgar's life. In this episode Edgar is seen battling nightmares, paranoia, violent outbursts, suicidal thoughts, and more symptoms experienced by people with PTSD (*You're the Worst*, S3E5, 2016).

Again this show follows some typical stereotypes of people with PTSD with Edgar being a veteran and having violent tendencies. These stereotypes can cause viewers to have an overgeneralized view of PTSD by leading them to believe that veterans are the only people that

struggle with PTSD and that all people with PTSD are violent. Despite some of the stereotypes used in the show, the depiction was received very positively by viewers with many people applauding the show's ability to "...tackle... important issues regarding veteran's rights and hidden trauma without reducing them to afterschool special pabulum" (Rivera, 2016). One way they do this is by, as recommended by the U.S. Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD (n.d.), depicting Edgar searching out treatment options and finding coping methods for his disorder. This helps to reduce the stigma around PTSD and also shows viewers with PTSD that treatment is possible and not something to be ashamed of. He is also seen struggling with problems related to PTSD that aren't often discussed, like difficulties in trying to find support and the fear of looking weak (*You're the Worst*, S3E5, 2016). By portraying these ideas in a character as likeable as Edgar, this disorder becomes easier to understand and the viewers are exposed to realities they would not otherwise know about.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental disorder defined by the DSM-5-TR as "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts" (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). When thinking of autism as portrayed in television, two main characters instantly came to mind: Sheldon Cooper in *Young Sheldon/The Big Bang Theory* and Dr. Shaun Murphy in *The Good Doctor*.

Young Sheldon/The Big Bang Theory

Young Sheldon is a Warner Bros. television series that follows the life of child genius Sheldon Cooper as he tries to grow up along with his family. However, although he is incredibly academically gifted, he has a total lack of understanding of social clues, behaviors, and norms.

This leads to him struggling to navigate every aspect of his life, including his friendships, school, and family life.

Young Sheldon acts as a prequel to the Warner Bros. television series *The Big Bang Theory*, a sitcom that also follows the life of the now-adult Sheldon Cooper, a brilliant physicist, once again attempting to navigate life outside the lab while still unable to fully grasp the nuances of social interaction.

Throughout both shows, although never explicitly stated, Sheldon exhibits many signs of Autism spectrum disorder and would almost certainly be diagnosed with it today. According to the DSM-5, to be diagnosed with autism, “a child must have persistent deficits in each of three areas of social communication and interaction” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024), which are defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024) as:

1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

Additionally, one must indicate “at least two of four types of restricted, repetitive behaviors” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024), which, again according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024), include:

1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take the same route or eat the same food every day).
3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).
4. Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).

Upon watching both shows, it becomes abundantly clear that Sheldon Cooper certainly falls under these categories. For example, as summarized by Orzel (2024), we see that Sheldon struggles to understand things such as sarcasm, often taking jokes completely literally, as well as lacking empathy for the people around him. He often needs direct verbal cues to understand how one is feeling, as he does not seem to understand emotions based on body language. He struggles to make and maintain friendships, often causing him to be considered “weird” and even becomes a common joke from his friends later in *The Big Bang Theory*. He has strict routines that cause

him to become distressed if they are altered in any way, including bathroom plans, in-class seating, and meal plans. He also hyper fixates on things such as comic books, pop-culture such as *Star Trek*, and his favorite television programs. Finally, he has many sensitivities towards his senses, such as loud noises and human touch, preferring to avoid it altogether. It is evident that Sheldon would be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder if he were to be examined for it.

Overall, the portrayal of Sheldon Cooper in both *Young Sheldon* and *The Big Bang Theory* both seem to be somewhat accurate representations, but definitely miss the mark. Although it is not officially stated that he has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, much of the plot of each show centers around it and how he handles the resulting situations, oftentimes relying on the support of the people around him for support. It also is not only used as a negative plot point; oftentimes, we see that Sheldon is able to provide insight and new perspectives on issues others around him cannot solve. For example, Sheldon was able to help his Dad, the coach of his high school's football team, train the quarterbacks due to his hyperfixation towards physics even though he had no knowledge of football whatsoever.

However, the show has faced much backlash (Reddit - Dive Into Anything, 2021; Is Sheldon Cooper A Good Representation of Autistic People?, n.d.; Is Young Sheldon Autistic?, n.d.) for its sometimes stereotypical portrayal of autism. The show is meant to be a comedy; as a result, his traits aligning with that of autism spectrum disorder are often used as a joke, with him being made fun of for his confusion or discomfort simply for the audience's amusement. It does nothing to move the plot forward and is simply reinforcing harmful stereotypes around autism. The show also falls under the trope of an "autistic savant stereotype" (Owens, n.d.), which is another unrealistic stereotype that can be harmful towards people with autism, as it may lead to unrealistic expectations on their capabilities or a sense of disappointment in one's own abilities.

Personally, I have very mixed feelings on the representation of autism spectrum disorder through *Young Sheldon* and *The Big Bang Theory*. On one hand, the show vastly increases awareness around autism, with many viewers having little to no knowledge about it in general. It prompts the audience to both think about it in a deeper light and often discuss it more frequently while watching. The show also helps dispel some misconceptions about autism, often showing that although Sheldon may struggle in some aspects of his life, he is always able to get through any given situation, on his own or with the support of the people around him. It also shows him having a stable and successful career and marriage, breaking another large stereotype surrounding autism. However, being a comedy and a sitcom in general, the representation of autism is not necessarily accurate throughout the show, and is often greatly exaggerated for comedic effect. This can instead help reinforce the negative stereotypes surrounding it, as many viewers of the show will become misinformed to what autism truly is. As a result, although I think that the show has many great moments in representing autism spectrum disorder, it falls short too often at giving the audience a truly accurate representation as to what it entails.

The Good Doctor

The Good Doctor is a Sony Pictures Television and ABC medical drama that follows Dr. Shaun Murphy, who works as a surgeon. Unlike Sheldon Cooper, however, Shaun is diagnosed with autism. The show follows him as he attempts to navigate both his work and his personal life while dealing with the effects of autism spectrum disorder.

As previously mentioned, the show immediately informs the audience that Dr. Murphy has autism as it is a central point towards the plot. Because he is explicitly diagnosed, we do not need to go into too much trouble to show why he would be, but here is a quick summary: Dr.

Shaun Murphy often struggles to hold conversation and is unable to understand body language and especially sarcasm. He easily falls prey to sensory overload, showing issues with human touch, bright lights, and loud noises. He is very tuned into his routines and does not do well when plans are changed all of a sudden, and he has shown to think in very literal manners (Does the Good Doctor Have Autism?, 2024). Overall, Shaun shows many different behaviors commonly associated with autism spectrum disorder, leading to his diagnoses.

I personally believe this to be another fairly accurate representation of autism spectrum disorder. Most episodes are centered around his struggles with autism and how he is able to navigate it in both his personal and work lives, especially towards the earlier seasons. Additionally, the show goes beyond simply showing his experiences with autism as it relates to his own personal struggles; that is, the show does well in showing how others react to it as well. For example, the show starts off with many characters at the hospital he works at having reservations about employing a surgeon with autism. Additionally, it shows the differing responses towards Shaun from his colleagues, including both positive and negative reactions. This then allows the audience to get a much deeper understanding of the effects of autism on Shaun, and therefore allow them to have a greater understanding of it in general. Additionally, the show goes deeper into the details of what Shaun is feeling and how he reacts to different stimuli than most other representations I have personally seen in popular culture, which also allows the audience to see how he overcomes adversity and is able to grow as a person. For example, he initially is unable to hold conversation or be touched by another person. However, by the end of the show, he is married and has children of his own. But what I appreciate most about it is that they did not simply have Shaun “change” and suddenly learn to be okay with

physical and social interactions. Instead, they set clear boundaries and safe boundaries that are able to help the audience learn more in depth about how one might interact with autism.

However, the show is not without its own fair share of faults. With it being a Hollywood production, the show tries hard to get as many interactions as possible. In an effort to do so, shows such as *The Good Doctor* attempt to add drama to entice viewers. This sometimes leads to an over exaggeration of Shaun and his autism, leading to a misrepresentation of what it really means to have autism spectrum disorder. It also proves to be another case of the “autistic savant stereotype” (Owens, n.d.) that again can cause people to skip over the true challenges that people with autism may face (Does the Good Doctor Have Autism?, 2024).

Personally, I still have some reservations about the representation of autism in *The Good Doctor*, but I also believe that it is the best representation of it in any media that I have personally viewed. I think it does a very good job of showing the nuances of both the strengths and challenges faced by people with autism spectrum disorder, as well as showing the indirect effects of it on Dr. Shaun Murphy, such as the discrimination he faced as a direct result of his autism. I also really appreciate how they have the supporting cast interact with Shaun, often depicting his growth with proper boundaries rather than random “improvement” for sake of the plot. My only real gripes are the occasional over exaggeration of Shaun’s reactions to different stimulants, as well as the somewhat stereotypical idea of his character in general. However, as far as television series go, this is by far the best representation of autism spectrum disorder that I have personally witnessed.

Discussion

Dyslexia

Both shows that were chosen to evaluate for their representation on dyslexia seemed to have done so in a relatively accurate way. Curious to find out why this may be, I did further research on each of the shows. A common theme I found was that there were people involved with each show that either had dyslexia themselves, or was close to someone who had dyslexia. Take *The Artful Dodger* for example, The actor who plays Jack Dawkins, Thomas Brodie-Sangster, has been diagnosed with dyslexia. In an interview for another project he was in, Thomas Brodie-Sangster reveals that he is dyslexic, so when looking into a new project if the writing is good and easy for him to understand, then he believes it must be good (*Thomas Brodie-Sangster and Emma Appleton on Becoming Punk Royalty With Danny Boyle, 2022*). This being said, it likely can be assumed that he chose to do *The Artful Dodger* because he thought it was good, meaning he also likely thought the representation of dyslexia was good.

Similar things happened when looking into Percy Jackson and the Olympians. I discovered that Rick Riordan, the author of the Percy Jackson books, actually wrote these books and gave the main character dyslexia to honor his son who was diagnosed with dyslexia as well as all of the students he taught who also had dyslexia over the years (AdLit, 2023). He also had a major part in the creation of the show which probably had an impact on the positive reactions on this portrayal.

This shows me that those who have the experience and full understanding of a diagnosis are better equipped to make a more accurate representation of a certain disability.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Both of the shows analyzed that portrayed characters with PTSD were overall well received by viewers and had a successful portrayal of what it is like to have a mental illness. What I found to be most interesting was how they were both able to balance a lot of dark scenes and comedy with an accurate portrayal of the disorder that people enjoyed.

In both *Barry* and *You're the Worst*, the characters with PTSD fell into some stereotypes that are commonly found in media when portraying PTSD. Barry and Edgar are both veterans, had violent outbursts, and experienced flashbacks and nightmares which are commonly seen characteristics in characters with PTSD in media that are not true of everyone that have PTSD. This reduced range of representation of people with PTSD can create a reduced view of the actual diverse group of people with PTSD and the symptoms that they experience. Of course it is also important to represent veterans and show the cycle of violence that some people fall victim to, but these are frequently the only depictions seen on television so it would have been nice to see some varying portrayals.

Despite these pitfalls, both shows did a great job of depicting PTSD in a way that many viewers with PTSD could relate to. Having characters to relate to that experience the same struggles as you can be very comforting and affirming. *You're the Worst* did especially well with this by displaying some struggles that a lot of people would not be aware of if they did not have the disorder. While watching these shows I found it amazing that they both found a way to keep the show humorous and entertaining while still depicting many harsh realities of PTSD. There were many scenes filled with violence, depression, hopelessness, guilt, and shame, that really got you thinking about the effects of trauma but yet both shows kept me laughing and invested in the wellbeing of the characters.

Overall what I found was that PTSD can be a difficult topic to address in a way that avoids stereotypes, achieves proper representation, and is relatable to viewers, but achieving this balance is very important. It is impossible for just one show to provide complete representation of all aspects of a mental illness and it can also be difficult to draw the line between misrepresentation and harmful stigmatization and accurate depictions of the harsh realities of some disorders. But, based on the observations of these episodes and the reviews both shows received, both *Barry* and *You're the Worst* were overall successful in achieving that balance and providing a portrayal that viewers appreciated.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Both shows that I reviewed had at least a somewhat accurate representation of individuals with autism spectrum disorder, but *The Good Doctor* seemed to be significantly better. However, along with some interesting similarities, there were also some key differences between them.

There were many similarities between the two shows. For one, both characters showed many similar behaviors as a result of their autism, such as struggles with conversation and understanding body language, aversion to touch, a more monotone pattern of speech, etc. However, they both had distinct personalities and autism still appeared vastly different between the two, showing that a diagnosis of autism does not mean the same thing for any two individuals. Additionally, both originally struggled to form deep connections with people at the beginning and were unable to form serious relationships. However, by the end of their respective series, both Sheldon Cooper and Dr. Shaun Murphy were able to build many close friendships and even marriages with children. However, both came across them in completely separate ways and ended up with completely different relationships. One negative similarity between the two was the “autistic savant stereotype” (Owens, n.d.) that both portrayed. Both of these can lead to a

false portrayal and therefore understanding of the complexities of autism spectrum disorder and lead to a false representation of it. However, both ended up with successful, stable, and completely separate careers from each other, which ends up being a more positive representation of the characters.

To me, I think the biggest differences between the two is a result of the differing natures of the two shows. *Young Sheldon/The Big Bang Theory* are supposed to be comedic sitcoms, whereas *The Good Doctor* is supposed to be a more serious drama. Therefore, while Sheldon Cooper becomes the target of many jokes throughout the series as a result of his autism, Dr. Shaun Murphy was never treated as a laughing stock in any portion of the show that I watched. I believe this is why I much prefer the representation of autism spectrum disorder in *The Good Doctor* rather than in *Young Sheldon/The Big Bang Theory*. It is a much less harmful representation of autism as it takes it much more seriously. I also believe this is a factor in why the creators of the show did not explicitly state that Sheldon has autism. They did not want to make jokes about a character who legitimately suffered from a disability, and so they left that detail out. Not only do I believe that treating it as a joke is harmful towards people who actually do have autism, I believe that not being open about Sheldon's diagnoses also hurts the representation of it, as a lack of clarity then leads to a lack of understanding and knowledge for the viewer that would otherwise help them understand more about autism. That is why I much prefer Dr. Shaun Murphy in *The Good Doctor*. Obviously fictional television series are never the best place to gather information, but people can still learn a ton of information from them. Therefore, an accurate representation of autism is crucial for the understanding of the viewers at home.

After looking into it, I could not find any information on how Jim Parsons, the actor who plays Sheldon Cooper, or the writers of *Young Sheldon/The Big Bang Theory* studied autism for the show, if at all. I believe that was a big reason for the show being a much poorer representation of autism. However, when I researched *The Good Doctor*, I found that they put in a significant amount of work into trying to give an accurate representation of autism in Dr. Shaun Murphy. Although Freddie Highmore, the actor who portrays Shaun, does not have autism himself, he has family members who do and has grown up around it for his entire life. However, for the accuracy of the show, he read books, watched documentaries on autism, and hired multiple consultants with autism to advise his portrayal of it in the show (Bhasin, 2024). So, similar to the results of the discussion of dyslexia, I also came to the conclusion that a proper representation of disabilities stem from people who experience it. Although no representation can be 100 percent accurate to the experiences of every single individual with autism, the best representations of it come from people with autism themselves.

Conclusion

Throughout our individual reflections on the research we each collected, we seemed to have one abundantly clear theme: relatability was key to an accurate portrayal of any given disability, and it seemed to be most accurate if it came from somebody who experienced it first hand. In *The Artful Dodger*, we see that the main actor actually has dyslexia and is therefore able to give a significantly better portrayal of it than somebody who does not. Similarly, because Rick Riordan's son has dyslexia, he was able to write a very accurate character in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. Both *Barry* and *You're the Worst* gave incredibly deep and detailed insight into post-traumatic stress disorder and the terrible effect it can have on somebody. *The Good Doctor*

employed people with autism to coach the main actor, and it was the most accurate portrayal of it that I have seen. However, when you watch *Young Sheldon/The Big Bang Theory*, you see that the portrayal of autism spectrum disorder is significantly worse, and notably there were no staff members with autism there to help the main actor's portrayal.

For many people, television is the introduction to many of these topics. For some, it is the only connection they have to it. For this reason it becomes imperative for these shows to provide as accurate a representation of these disabilities as possible. It is an entertaining way to educate a massive audience, but doing so poorly could set the information surrounding these disabilities back devastatingly. And with more and more shows coming out, as well as a massive increase in information about disabilities and the access to it, it is becoming more important than ever that these representations are as accurate as possible. Hopefully the companies making these shows will be able to come to the same conclusion, and we will all be better off for it.

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