

RESEARCH

Resisting Normal: Questioning Media Depictions of Autistic Youth and Their Families

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A critical social sciences perspective, critical race and disability studies, media studies, lived experience, and the neurodivergence movement shape a conceptual framework in this paper to critique and resist popular media tropes of autistic people and their families. 'Normal' and its modern meanings are presented, followed by a theoretical re-framing. Then, an irreverent and informal critique of one example US newscast highlights the dominant narrative and invites readers to unlearn these myths of normal. Recurring hegemonic news frames reflect a larger culture where familial abuse and violence against autistic people is dangerously presented as reasonable. Counter narratives exist, however. Autism can be understood as a natural, integral, welcome part of a wider human neurodiversity that enriches society. Families and autistic advocates must work together to resist and respond to pressure to conform to myths of normality.

Keywords: critical race theory; disabilities studies; media studies; neurodiversity; ableism; social construction of normal

Introduction

What I wish for is a cure for the common ill that pervades too many lives, the ill that makes people compare themselves to a normal that is measured in terms of perfect and absolute standards, most of which are impossible for anyone to reach.

(Liane Holliday Willey 1999: 96)

Popular US media often promotes and sells a narrow vision of what a family should look like, act like, and think like, as a conceptualized unit. Many consumers of media likely do not question what is being set as societal expectations of what is normal for families, even if their own family's lived experiences are not reflected back at them. This paper disrupts that passive relationship specifically about media depictions of families with autistic¹ children. Through a critical examination of how media rhetoric both develops and perpetuates the myth of normality in a representative newscast, I aim to resist the explicit and implicit assumptions about lived experiences of autistic people, their siblings, and their families. Further, this paper is not adhering strictly to an academic voice or format, although all sources are cited, because my voice here is both as the parent of an autistic teenager and as a person with disabilities herself: It is this voice that seems most suited for a critical response. The stylistic choices made here are thus intentional and transparent because personal perspective is needed to unravel the dense, and at times suffocating, narratives that media often deliver about families such as mine.

What Is 'Normal'?

nor·mal/noun/nôrməl/

1 : perpendicular; especially: perpendicular to a *tangent* (see *tangent* 3) at a point of tangency

2 a : according with, constituting, or not deviating from a norm, rule, or principle

b : conforming to a type, standard, or regular pattern

3 : occurring naturally

¹ I intentionally use the adjective 'autistic' in the spirit of identity-first language throughout, which is preferred by many autistic advocates. For them, autism is a neurobiological difference deeply integral to, and not separated from, their identity (Lydia Brown 2017; ASAN 2018; Jeff Gitchel 2011). In policy work, scholars often use the practice of person-first language, such as the phrase "child with autism."

- 4 a : of, relating to, or characterized by average intelligence or development
 b : free from mental disorder : sane

(*Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online* 2018)

From the above definitions one to four, modern meanings of normal vary. In definition one, normal is mathematical, referring to the perpendicular positioning of objects; thus it is not connected explicitly to human behavior. It does, however, show a meaning held within a logic-based discipline, where ambiguity is unwelcome, except at its most theoretical level.² For this paper's purposes, the focus is narrowed to the three modern social uses of normal found in the US-based *Merriam-Webster* definitions of two to four.

In definition two above, normal serves as a social ordering or a call to order. Normal is both a lack of deviation from accepted norms, rules, or principles, and is a quality of conforming to societally constructed types, standards, or regular patterns. Each society develops, over time, a set of constraints, or rules, of what it deems normal. Inequities resulting from these strictures of normality are constructed by the dominating society's fears and prejudices surrounding specific characteristics that they interpret as threatening their power, position, and privilege. This focus on power is a common way to analyze societies within a critical social sciences framework (Eakin et al. 1996).

In definition three, however, normal is a characteristic that is occurring naturally. In this sense, if a person were born with one green eye and one brown eye, it would be normal for them to have one green and one brown eye: that is their naturally occurring appearance. If they decided to put in one eye contact to make both eyes appear green, then their eyes would no longer be natural or normal for them, but an act of conformity. This is not a common usage of normal in the United States. The unease people might feel when considering this definition is likely due in that normality is most often an invisible social construct imposed upon them and that largely goes unquestioned. The wild perspective shift from definition two to three demands that people face two opposing definitions of what normal could be.

To complicate matters, definition four shifts readers back to the state where normal is seen as a condition of average intelligence and development, and that is sane and free from mental disorder. Average is a statistical concept: inanimate, aggregate, not embodied in any one person, as no one can achieve this state of statistically average intelligence and development. People can display characteristics that fall into ranges of calculated averages and be seen as typical, but that state is not likely to remain static over a lifetime. Simply put, definition four is an elaboration of definition two's meaning: society, or its dominant members, collectively shape and control what the ranges of normal are per its perceived and advertised averages of intelligence and development. Whoever falls outside of this privileged protection is labeled abnormal. Regulation and policing of those abnormal in US society have a long, complex, fluctuating, and troubled history (Trent 2016; Hanes et al. 2017; McGuire 2016; Baynton 2016), and the concept of normal intersects more than perceived ability. Gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, and other identities determine where a group and an individual fall under the spectrum of normality. As history shows, definition three is overpowered semantically by the others, sandwiched between the thick bread of social control of what and who can be normal.

Dismantling Normal: Re-framing the Concept

The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social worker'-judge.

—Michel Foucault (cited in Felluga 2011)

It can be argued that an unspoken goal of social structures built to supposedly support people with disabilities, such as special education or sheltered workshops, is to seek to control and segregate people who drift too far physically, mentally, and behaviorally from norms. Each containment type serves as an interlocking, smaller, lesser version of the *one* preferred societal reality, or as Michalko suggests: each locale could be viewed as an attempt to create related, interconnected 'tributaries' of the mainstream ideal (2002: 67). US society's ideal normal, when applied to disability, or in this case, autism, is not benign. It is presented daily to viewers and listeners in what critical theorists call a lens of ableism. Focusing on ableism, instead of depicting disability as a plight or problem located within an individual, allows a way to see the intricate machinery behind societal prejudice and assumptions. Critical disability studies scholar Fiona Campbell (2001) defines ableism as:

² The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), on the other hand, lists 20 meanings for normal; six are directly about humans or societal expectations and patterns of human behavior, with 14 additional meanings predominately technical, positivist terms from the natural or hard sciences. Thus, normal has many technical meanings within the sciences; yet, OED's six social meanings do pervade US culture to delineate human behavior and type, with which this paper is concerned. The Merriam Webster's definitions of normal are used for the sake of simplicity.

...a network of beliefs, processes, and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability is cast as a diminished state of being human (2008: 153–154).

In addition to conceptualizing ableism, Critical Race Theory (CRT) helps to locate a critique within the ableist subtexts in media. CRT helps centralize the complexity of the othering acted upon humans with perceived differences: its critique focuses on what is desired and undesired by a dominant society. It also notes this desire is in a state of flux. Those in places of power and privilege dance a constant dance to justify their stifling of alternate ways of being and thinking that appear to threaten their safety, comfort and privilege (Campbell 2001: 150–154). Thus, media rhetoric is a form of policing deviance.

Derrick Bell (1995) suggests something is missing in most critiques: a study of the limits of liberal tolerance of disability, or the points where an interest convergence occurs; that is, how the othered may, up to a certain point, serve to perpetuate interests of the power structure. Then, there may be points of disruption, where the other as subject can suddenly depart from the mainstream investment in ableism (Campbell 2008: 152). The point of disruption becomes a way for audiences to detect acts of resistance against the confines of media messaging.

Another useful theory that grew out of the 1970s originating social model of disability is the Social Construction of Disablement Interpretation (SCOD), which is adaptable to media critiques (Steven Smith 2009). SCOD theory posits that disability is caused by the way impairments are defined and associated with characteristics that are ‘necessarily assumed to have a negative impact on personal identity, development, and fulfillment’ (Smith 2009: 22). Negative qualities are attached to common attributes of autistic people because varied ideas about autistic health and contentment are unfathomable. A recent critical disability stance beyond SCOD is found in the burgeoning neurodivergence movement, where autistic people are expressing pride, even superiority, in their neurobiological differences from NTs (neurotypicals). This disability pride movement focuses on strengths that autism brings to their personhood and to greater society. At the same time, and in solidarity, neurodivergent activists denounce violence and discrimination against all marginalized peoples (ASAN 2018; Brown 2018; Yergeau 2011).

While no person is immune to the disabling powers of ableism, racism, or any ‘ism,’ those people depicted as sub-human by society suffer the most in the perpetuation of myths of normalcy. The above theoretical concepts disrupt this societal practice. To effectively disrupt the myths, critiques need to take risks and attempt new ways to reveal how ableism is so ‘deeply and subliminally embedded within the culture’ (Campbell 2008: 153). In this way, media can be studied as both a societal construction and an act of reinforcement of ableism.

News Frames as Myths

Scholars in media studies find patterns of silence and assumptions built into the warp and woof of media systems, and we can apply their work to recurring depictions of disability and autism. News is not an objective truth. Rather, news is, per Schudson a form of literature, and journalists work within a cultural tradition of storytelling and picture making. They ‘inherit certain sentence constructions, with a number of vital assumptions about the world built in’ (Schudson 2002: 262). To reveal these assumptions, news frames described by Beth Haller et al. (2010) are applicable. News frames are central organizing storylines that are implicit, and both the media journalists and mainstream audience believe the narratives are reflecting what is normal or expected as truth (2010: 9). Haller et al. see news frames as imbued with the power of the dominant able-bodied culture, which defines and classifies disability, and news media act as ‘agents in the social construction of reality’ (Haller et al. 2010: 13). What media depicts is insight into what the dominant culture wishes to project, that disability brings harmful circumstances for families. Below is a brief summary of common news frames surrounding disability, and more specifically autism, that perpetuate dominant societal beliefs about neurodivergence.

Phillips (1990: 850) describes three news frames about the general disability experience pervasive in US culture: (1) that society perceives disabled persons to be damaged, defective, and less socially marketable than nondisabled persons; (2) that society believes disabled persons must try harder to overcome obstacles in culture and should strive to achieve normality; and (3) that society believes disabled people prefer to be with their own kind. Disability messages in the media could also be summarized as: (1) disability is something to fix (curative and preventive medicine); (2) something to be made stronger (rehabilitation and special education); and (3) something to help (charity and pity) (Michalko 2002: 68). The specific news frames surrounding autism contain elements of all the above societal assumptions, but its frames arguably take on a more sensational tone, in part because autism is the US media’s most recent ‘disability darling,’ as seen in numerous stories about autistic people and their families. Yergeau (2010: 9) wryly notes that typical autism stories have very repetitive narratives, namely: that autism is an epidemic; it needs a cure; it is a deficit; and, also, ‘what woeful despair autism is for families’. To illustrate the latter, Yergeau quotes from blatantly violent statements found in mainstream media, such as an example of a reporter describing the urge to murder an autistic child as a ‘common feeling’ (2010: 9). Such messaging in media plays a critical but overlooked role in sanctioning violence as an acceptable means for policing and silencing minds and bodies of difference. Indeed, popular media and social media often depict autism as a negative scourge to be eradicated, so much so, that even the murdering of autistic children can be voiced as acceptable, reasonable, even mundane. Cultural assumptions that arise from such acts of storytelling and picture-making have visceral ramifications for how autistic people are treated by so-called normal people (Haller 1998: 9).

Even when, in another common trope, people with disabilities are portrayed as courageous and inspirational, as they are simply going about their daily lives, getting married, having a child, getting a job, there is a darker side to the supposed shared humanity the media is highlighting by their focus on people with disabilities. Such stories are the ‘feel good’ trope, yet also pity, condescension, ‘how heroic,’ and the underlying ‘thank god, it’s not me’ sentiment pervade the spectacle. This is what disability scholars call ‘inspiration porn’ (Grue 2016). Like other oppressed groups, people with disabilities belong to a long troubled history in which they have been pitied, feared, examined, and vilified by the dominant society; they have been described as threats to power and order (Haller 1998: 9). I would argue further that autistic people, like any marginalized group, are simultaneously pitied *and* feared. Media utilizes coded language that needs to be deciphered because, as Simi Linton claims, ‘language conveys passivity and victimization, [it] reinforces certain stereotypes...and [it] implies that sadness and misery are the product of a disabling condition’ (Linton 1998: 25). News frames found within typical media make the assumption that ‘autistic people either cannot represent themselves or cannot represent themselves effectively as neurotypical (NT) people can represent them’ and when autistic people do speak out articulately, they are accused of not truly being autistic (Yergeau 2010: 7). Media thus has framed the autism narrative in terms of pity, condescension, something to cure. The autistic person, furthermore, is symbolized as a white male child who is a trapped soul held prisoner by the disease, autism. His family, in turn, prays and fights against this ‘disease,’ so that their child can be released from the curse of autism and returned to them. And if that cannot happen, they bemoan their fate.

Media Trope: Typical Siblings as Victims of Autism

What happens, per popular media, when an autistic person enters in a family picture? A news story from a local media broadcast, WPIX-TV New York (Watkins 2011) employs the trope we have already described: that siblings of autistic children are collateral victims of autism and are being denied normal families. This trope is mirrored in a dominant assumptive hypothesis in most social science research studies that focus on the negative effects an autistic sibling has on a typical sibling; however, the research findings demonstrate, despite the negative hypotheses, that there are both positive and negative outcomes associated with being a sibling of an autistic person. The psychological development of the typical sibling is not statistically different from siblings without autistic siblings (Meltzer & Kramer 2016). Further, no research studies I found ever sought to ask if autistic children are harmed by having a typical sibling. Media prefers to portray the impact on typical siblings as negative (McNeil 2011; Cain 2012; Paltrow 2015). This example WPIX-TV segment was selected for critique not because it was the most sensational, but because it well-illustrates throughout its narrative the implicit societal assumption that autism destroys its otherwise normal families.

It is critical to note that Jim Watkins of WPIX-TV produced his multiple episodes on autism in part due to his personal experiences with an autistic son and he uses it to promote the controversial film his wife Lauren Thierry had made. Watkins not only plugs his wife’s films more than once over the seven news segments on autism, he also normalizes her controversial view that families are negatively affected by autism, that autism, and thus the autistic child, are to blame. For instance, in her film *Autism Every Day* (Wright & Thierry 2006), Thierry depicts a mother admitting to have a recurring fantasy of driving off a bridge with her autistic child as nothing out of the ordinary. The only reason she has not killed herself and her autistic son is, the mother claims, that her typical child was waiting for her at home. Thierry later admits in an interview that she purposefully highlighted the most ‘harrowing’ family scenes, such as this interview with the suicidal mother, by specifically asking families to not groom nor clean their children or their homes prior to filming and to also exclude support staff in scenes, so that their parenting challenges were made ‘more real’ (Baggs 2006).

Thus, when Watkins tells listeners that his oldest son has autism, the audience will take his views as credible and likely will not be aware of his family’s extreme views about autistic people. His views contain strong elements of internalized ableism. For example, he cannot see any worth in his autistic son because the boy exists outside what is typical and good in Watkin’s other idealized sons. He supports a news frame of ‘families devastated by autism’ with full force. Watkins’s personal experiences with his son serve as the opening and closing frames to his series to support and perpetuate that autism has a negative impact on families. Systemic social failures facing families, such as lack of social and governmental supports, stigma, and lack of affordable access to services are never discussed as factors contributing to families’ stress. Moments of humor and happiness depicted in video footage of families are never commented upon; as to be seen, only Watkins gloomy voiceover remains constant. The following comments I will make on the major unfolding scenes are framed as informal, but critical discourse analysis, organized thematically by the normality myths or assumptions. My intention is to write both informally and with irreverence, as a way to respond to these tropes.

Critique: WPIX-TV Newscast ‘Siblings Stress’

Myth 1: Autism destroys families

Early media on autism focused on autism as an ‘epidemic’ and a ‘disease’ that destroyed families, in part due to the perspective delivered by the still powerful organization Autism Speaks, who funded Thierry’s film. Its wealthy founders, moreover, are Watkins’s in-laws, or Thierry’s parents. The WPIX-TV newscast sets the stage for classic examples of the negative tropes found in US media even today. The trope that autism destroys families is clear from the start, as Watkins opens his segment ‘Sibling Stress’ with the claim: ‘Autism takes a direct emotional hit on the entire family.’ This

dominant news frame is more explicit here than in other media reports. His words 'direct emotional hit' carry war-like imagery. Placed into a repeated loop of a film clip in my mind, his words act like a grey bomb dropping down on the home of prototypical idealized US family (i.e., a white, heterosexual couple, with large dog in yard, and two blonde blue-eyed children, all smiling, perhaps barbequing in the backyard). A large explosion follows. The entire family is erased from the deadly direct emotional hit that is autism.

He continues to cite certain destruction for families in war-like language as well in the story. In another voiceover, he ominously states, '[Sibling] support groups...cater to the kids all too often overlooked in the havoc wreaked on families with autism.' Watkins cites autism, and not societal constraints of what is an acceptable construct for a family, as the cause of 'havoc' in the families, and its typical kids thus need special catering by mental health professionals to deal with the carnage left in the wake of their autistic siblings.

Myth 2: Typical siblings are unsung heroes; ignored, lost, and alone

In addition to seeing them as overlooked family members above, Watkins calls the typical brothers and sisters of autistic children 'unsung heroes.' He doesn't explain what qualities are unsung and heroic about typical siblings. He assumes we know how great it is to be normal. I don't want such a normal as his, however. He feels a sibling that has a, gasp, autistic brother or sister is a hero. Are autistic siblings then a typical sibling's foil? If the hero is unsung, this 'unsungness' may suggest they are suffering by not getting their parents' full attention a normal person deserves, as a birthright of their being normal (and white).

Take for instance, how the white, upper-middle class father of the first portrayed family sets the scene for the camera. Two brothers, Davey and Andrew, are jumping happily together on the trampoline. Their father then instructs his younger, typical son Andrew, 'See if you can hold hands with [older autistic son] Davey and jump together.' The camera shows Andrew reaching for Davey's hand, but Davey pulls away his own hand to keep on jumping. Andrew collapses dejectedly onto the trampoline. This fatherly suggestion for the brothers to hold hands strikes me as staged, for dramatic effect. Is jumping while holding hands a normal request for brothers aged twelve and six to make? I think most brothers would not like to do that, especially an older brother. Rather, I am quite sure that the father has the resulting rejection in mind, full knowing that his autistic son Davey is clearly not fond of being touched, not an uncommon trait for some autistic people. The father seeks to create a scene in which Davey rejects his brother's hand. The audience sees the rejection by Davey as a symbolic travesty, rather than a simple sensory preference. Here, I wish to question the ethics of the father's words and deeds rather than Davey's. Of course, Watkins voiceover inserts itself as Andrew collapses to the trampoline: 'Davey is autistic and that often leaves younger brother Andrew feeling lost and alone.' How can Watkins say Andrew is lost and alone? He has a father and a mother. His brother Davey is also very much there, jumping happily on the trampoline. Watkins's voice, the father's ploy, and Andrew lying prone on the trampoline all work to reconfigure Davey's dislike of hand-holding as a sweeping assumption that he fails at being a big brother.

In another example of the suffering typical sibling trope, a (white) therapist, Charley Moskowitz, who has formed a support group for typical (white, upper-income) siblings with (white) autistic siblings, is interviewed. Moskowitz speaks directly to the camera that typical siblings 'mourn the loss of typical family life everyday...They've lost their brother and sister, they don't have the brother and sister they thought they'd have.' The camera then switch to this scene: A shot of a round table full of 7–10 typical (white, well-dressed, in brand-name clothing) siblings sitting around it, with Moskowitz talking with emphatic hand gestures. Moskowitz claim that typical siblings lose typical family life is suspect, however. Wouldn't older siblings naturally adapt to added siblings, autistic or not, and wouldn't younger typical siblings grow up feeling their autistic siblings' differences were just a part of who they were as people? I argue that they would not see their autistic siblings as a problem unless they were taught this by their parents or by society. Moskowitz instead equates a typical sibling's loss of typical family life as an inescapable loss. To her, it is that loss of an ideal (white) family equates deep grief.

She says that these siblings are the ones that 'bear the brunt of so much. They bear the pain, the agony, the sorrow, the anger, the despair, and the isolation.' Moskowitz's exaggerates that the natural adjustment any sibling undergoes when they have another sibling is a certain maladjustment when that sibling is autistic. This is troubling for it claims extreme emotional costs and the cause is the autistic sibling. Research does not hold up her claims (Meadan et al. 2010). Moskowitz's list of negative nouns acts to amplify Watkins's earlier adjectives, carrying even more emotional weight now the effects are things, not just attributes.

Watkins's ominous voice talks over the group therapy scene: 'For generations, siblings of autistic children were ignored. Their confusion, their fear, swept under the carpet by parents too overwhelmed caring for their disabled children....' The logic of his claim is faulty. Generations of typical siblings were ignored? In fact, much less than a generation ago, parents were actively encouraged by experts to send their autistic children to state-run facilities for life. One reason for institutionalization from doctors was that the presence of an autistic child would harm typical siblings' development (Meltzer & Kramer 2016). However, Watkins instead claims typical siblings suffer, not their autistic siblings. Disability history tells us the opposite.

Watkins, however, cannot stop there. Not only are siblings ignored, Watkins tells of more depths of mental anguish. He claims siblings have 'shame, survivor's guilt, embarrassment, isolation.' His latest list of what the typical siblings face

is meant to amplify the ruined family trope. Viewers are told to see the psychological toll of having an autistic sibling. It is an embarrassment. It is shame. It is isolation. Watkins implies the autistic sibling is a tragedy that the typical siblings escaped, but they must carry on with survivor's guilt.

Myth 3: Typical siblings denied normal childhood; grow up too fast

This newscast focuses its visual and oral arguments about the devastating impact of an autistic sibling by predominately featuring Andrew and Davey. Their mother tells the camera that her typical younger son, Andrew, 'has to function as the big brother.' Watkins's voice inserts itself: 'All six-year-old Andrew wants is a typical afternoon, playing in his backyard, but his twelve-year-old brother, Davey, is anything but typical.' Typical Andrew is denied a typical afternoon and a typical brother. A question arises: what is a typical brother and the typical afternoon that they envision? The audience is assumed to know. Is it a scene of an older brother punching around the little brother? Would that be better or typical enough for them? As I often say, perhaps normal is overrated. What the camera does show of the two boys: They are both in a sprawling backyard running about, as they wish, and both are at ease with each other.

The camera doesn't let the scene last for long. Instead, little Andrew says: 'I wish that I could really play with him, so that he could be my real big brother, and that's my secret wish.' This longing for a real big brother raises a red flag of internalized ableism: Andrew longs for the ideal brother who would play with him in a certain prescribed way. The audience is forced into a close-up of this little blonde boy's face, with melodramatic music playing. The rhetorical aim is to manipulate viewers, to make them feel sad for this boy who longs for a typical brother. I cannot help but wonder what his parents taught Andrew, or what society has taught him. Do they say something is wrong with Davey, or that he is not a real human? Davey is running around and jumping on the trampoline, more or less like Andrew is. Is it possible the younger child was fed this line to parrot it back for the cameras, to fulfill their aim? This yearning for an ideal sibling appears again in the words of an unnamed typical sibling at the Moskowitz therapy session: 'It was hard to get over it; that it wasn't going to be a normal brother relationship with Joey. We weren't going to be able to go outside and have a regular catch.' Again, he has been sold a peculiar white brother ideal, almost like a post-war 1950s tract housing suburban ideal. The myth of normal is the likely culprit behind the overly negative shaping of the narrative arc.

This preference for an upper-income white suburban family ideal is shown throughout this newscast. An additional example is of a white heterosexual couple in another expansive home, with two daughters, nine-year-old Lauren and her thirteen-year-old autistic sister, Jody. Watkins explains to viewers that Lauren 'may seem old beyond her years but like any other kid, she still wants desperately just to be a kid,' which implies that, like Andrew, Lauren is being denied her right to normalcy by the scourge that is autism, or that is her older sister Jody. Yet, how then is Lauren not a kid, exactly? She looks and acts like a kid: she's short, she has a squeaky voice, she is shown happily talking to her big sister Jody about her Pooh Bear. I fail to see evidence of Watkins's claim. If anything, Lauren looks happy to share her sister Jody's company.

Myth 4: Typical siblings burdened for life by autistic sibling

At the end of this sibling segment, Watkins reappears on scene (foregoing his brooding voiceovers) and speaks morosely into the camera: 'As the parent of an autistic child, I can tell you it is what keeps us up at night. What happens to our child, who can't talk, can't dress himself, let alone fend for himself when my wife and I are gone? It is those little nine-year-old boys, the two little blonde hair boys, who are my twin sons who will be their brother's keepers one day and it will change their childhood and it is going to make ... affect all their choices they make in adulthood forever.' Watkins expresses sleepless worry over his autistic child's fate, but is that his son's fault or it is that he thinks society will not support his son as a rightful member of his community? Watkins expresses internalized ableism because he cannot recognize that his son has intrinsic value as a human being. Instead, he laments less about his son's perceived dire fate and more that his twin sons will have to care for their brother; he states their lives will be negatively affected forever by their autistic brother. Watkins is seeking sympathy for his typical children's sorry fate. He does not address that what we really need is a communal interdependent society that accepts and supports people as they naturally are. Watkins increases melodrama with the very telling comment: his 'two little blonde boys' will be changed for the worse by the obligations imposed on them to care for their older brother. Is the audience supposed to feel more pity and more outrage that not one, but two, twin beacons of social privilege will 'suffer'? It appears to Watkins to be doubly horrifying that his two, not one, blonde-haired white boys are effectively being pulled into the undertow of the unwelcome abnormality that is his older son.

Watkins closes by inviting commentary from two medical 'experts' on autism, but he first frames their expertise by providing his final list of words to describe the feelings that his twin sons have toward their older autistic brother. He explains his twins' need therapy. He says his twin sons feel 'upset, frustrated, angry, horrible guilt' and tells the doctors and the audience that his typical twins grieve that they do not have an older brother, like their peers do, who can teach them to be good at video games. Watkins emphasizes this all to the audience very seriously, as if this example should devastate us. He then lists the ways his older son is dependent on others. Watkins does not seem to imagine any possibility that his son might gain skills over time on his own natural developmental pathway. It is as if his older autistic son is a fixed object to him, unable to change or grow. Watkins gives us no indication ever that his autistic son has gifts, strengths, or positive attributes. He also never expresses any love for him.

Resisting 'Normal': Thriving in the Margins

My above critique, while informal, aims to pay attention to and undo news frames that claim autism is bad. Being in a family with an autistic child alters the family not because of the child, but because society set up such a constrictive space for its mythic ideal of normalcy. As seen, autistic people are portrayed as (white) burdens who steal their (white privileged) parents' attention from their typical (white) siblings. Autistic people bring, per this a narrative, untold ruin and burden to their families. Yet, these claims deny the actual rich, positive complexities that many autistic families experience. Media ignores the actual barriers that many families face. Per research, key factors in autistic families that associate with unhealthy relationships and high stress levels are a lack of a social support system, financial strain, low socioeconomic status, and an absence of parental coping strategies (Meadan et al. 2010). Yet families in this newscast appear to dwell in primarily white, upper-class, privileged suburban spaces. No doubt they face unexpected challenges, but what they despair about the most on screen is the loss of their normalcy. Societal rejection amongst the wealthy might explain the urge for these families, as families accustomed to social inclusion and white privilege, to despise differences. Some may not easily wish to give up a normality they feel was promised to people of their socioeconomic status. Yet families with autistic children, like my own, can and do thrive despite a lack of wealth, despite persistent racism and ableism, and despite social prejudice. They can love each other because of their neuro-differences, not despite them, and they actively seek to protect each other. Yet, negative media messages, as illustrated in the Watkin's news segment, serve to perpetuate dangerous depictions of autistic people as abject, undesirable burdens. Some parents, teachers, doctors, family members, scholars, and even random strangers in the grocery store will accept these claims without questioning and this is a societal tragedy.

What my autistic son insists every day by his very insistent presence in the world is that the world needs to learn to honor and respect his full right to be as he is. He will rightly grow to define himself, as we all do, over time. As a family we try to resist societal pressure to police his behavior to fit in. He is not a problem for us. He is a whole, beautiful, and complex human. I wrote this paper to promote one way to approach unlearning the US media's perpetuation of narrow ideals of who and who is not normal. Critiques of media counteract the underlying violence that normalcy myths endorse. Those who live at the margins, whether by choice or by force, have the most potential and largest need to transform society. As scholar bell hooks (1990) notes, the margin is 'more than a site of deprivation ... it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance' (quoted in Campbell 2008:160). Marginal, alternative viewpoints, while not popular, allow for more complex, expansive depictions of human neurodiversity. Families like mine need to create more breathing space to exist as our natural selves, without the fear of Foucault's many judges. Normal is a powerful ideology, a standpoint, and a social construction (Michalko 2002: 67). This paper calls attention to the fact that what has been sold to society as normal privileges a few over most others. Small, intentional actions taken by different marginalized humans can help build a new normal that includes us all. Being different, whether in mind or body, should never be depicted as a reasonable death warrant. Becoming perfectly human is possible if all naturally occurring human differences can, through acts of resistance, come to be accepted as perfectly and utterly normal.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing financial, professional, or personal interests that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

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