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**Opposing Forces?
Autism and Dating, Romance, and Sexuality in the Mainstream Media**

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Abstract

Autism and romance occupy a space of discomfort in mainstream media conversation. Employing post-structuralist textual analysis, I explore themes arising from mainstream media representations of autism and dating, sexuality, and romance through eleven feature articles from major American newspapers. The United States mainstream media applies a medical model lens to autism, associates immaturity and a lack of empathy with autistic people, and positions autistic sexuality as disruptive and dangerous. Because autistic sexuality representation counters conventional concepts of romance, autism and romance are positioned as opposing forces. The mainstream media portrays autistic people who date through supercrip narratives. Rather than showing the vast diversity of autism communities, mainstream news articles present autistic people through a heterosexualized, gendered, and whitewashed lens. As a disability studies scholar and autistic writer, I advocate for mainstream news coverage that takes a social model approach to autism, incorporates multiple identities, and provides accurate reflections of autistic people as loving adults, as well as disability rights activism that addresses underlying sexual ableism in American society.

Keywords

autism; autistic people; sexuality; romance; disability studies; media studies; media representation; content analysis

Autistic adults actively participate in dating, romance, and intimate relationships, embracing a wide array of gender identities and sexual orientations, yet the mainstream media in the United States largely misrepresents autistic sexuality. Beth Haller (2000) writes that the mass media's narratives about disability follow Carey's 1989 idea of "news representations not as information dissemination, but as a framing and reinforcement of a specific view of the world" (p. 278). The media both contributes to and reflects cultural values surrounding autism. News articles show whether nonautistic people consider autistic people to be potential dates and mates, as well as the way society structures dating, romance, and sexuality—and how these structures and attitudes enact sexual ableism. By exploring feature article and film review representations

of autistic people's romantic relationships, as well as the spaces where journalists remain silent, I analyze how the mass media reflects and constructs cultural narratives about autism, impairment, adulthood, empathy, sexuality, and identity.

Literature Review

Disability studies scholars analyze popular culture representations of disability and sexuality. From close readings of media images, disability studies and queer theory scholar Eli Clare (2009) concludes that representations restrict disabled sexuality and suggests, "We need images of heterosexual marriage, queer marriage, one-night stands, serial monogamy, lesbian butch and femme, first dates, enduring companionship, gay men in drag, outrageous flirtation and serious commitment, all crip style" (pp. 136-137). Autistic writers who analyze media representations of autistic sexuality are situated in this larger context of disability studies content analysis. Kim Sauder (2017), a disability studies writer who is autistic and has cerebral palsy, critiques an essay in which a parent considers hiring her autistic adult son a sex worker because he wants a girlfriend. Sauder pinpoints the relationship between the inaccurate belief that disabled men can only experience sexuality through sex workers and "the way that disabled people have been culturally desexualized" (2017, para. 22). Sauder's analysis shows how media's desexualized portrayals of disabled people can create real-world romantic difficulties, making it vital to set aside outmoded ableist stereotypes and "include disabled people as socially acceptable and desirable sexual and romantic partners" (2017, para. 22). While Sauder illuminates the link between media representation and real-world policy, autistic blogger M. Kelter (2014) wants to see realistic depictions of autistic adults:

I'm tired of seeing adult ASD [autism spectrum disorder] characters that are devoid of sexuality. Even if a character has a romantic experience, it is often treated as a comedic

moment, or the character is childlike in relation to their own desires. We are long overdue for a mature, grown up depiction of autistic sexuality. (Kelter, 2014, para. 15)

When Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist (2014) analyzed sexuality discourses in the Swedish autistic self-advocacy magazine *Empowerment*, she found that the magazine articles contained alternative frameworks for understanding autistic sexuality, such as the social model of disability and the neurodiversity paradigm. While some *Empowerment* articles followed the medical model by seeing autistic sexuality through a deficit lens, writers also discussed lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) identities; promoted sexual agency and neurodiversity; questioned neurotypical, gender-normative, and heteronormative romantic ideals; and argued that autistic sexuality, while distinct from nonautistic sexuality, has much to offer (Rosqvist, 2014, p. 362). Rosqvist's *Empowerment* magazine analysis illustrates the transformative result of centering autistic voices in discussions of autistic sexuality.

Media and disability studies scholar Beth Haller (2000) explains that news filtered through the medical model of disability media representation views autism and other disability as "an illness or malfunction, which causes a state of dependency," while the supercrip model of disability media representation tells a story of overcoming (p. 275). Referencing the film *Mercury Rising* (1998), Douwe Draaisma (2009) demonstrated these models' interconnectedness: "There are two options for an autistic person: ... It is either diminished capacity or superhuman capacity, but nothing in between" (Draaisma, 2009, p. 1477).

Medicalized autism depictions cement ableism and stigma. When Avery E. Holton, Laura C. Farrell, and Julie L. Fudge (2014) analyzed 473 American and British autism-themed articles from 1998 to 2012, they found that "nearly two thirds of the coverage about autism contained explicit stigmatizing cues" (p. 200). By relying on labels and symptomology and framing autism as either potentially preventable or able to be overcome, news articles invoked the medical and

supercrip models of disability media representation (Holton, Farrell, & Fudge, 2014, p. 201). Holton, Farrell, and Fudge write that "focus on the 'violent,' 'dismal,' 'abnormal,' 'shy,' or 'destructive' nature of autism can create for the public a skewed perception of what it means to be autistic" (2014, p. 200). Alshaba Billawalla and Gregor Wolbring (2014) analyzed 198 autism-themed *New York Times* articles from 1973 to 2011 and found that the medical model dominated, with just 12% of articles representing autism as neurodiversity (para. 11). Billawalla and Wolbring posit that *New York Times* readers "are heavily exposed to a medical narrative, which focuses on trying to identify what is wrong with autistic individuals, what is different, what abilities they do not have" (2014, para. 22). Huws and Jones (2010) revealed medicalized language in British autism news, noting, "Discourses about autism present it as an affliction of suffering, and people are referred to as being victims of this condition" (p. 101). In her analysis of 302 autism-related *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles from 1996 to 2006, Brooke Weberling McKeever (2012) found, "Overall, 48% of articles discussed possible solutions or remedies for autism, while 35% of articles discussed possible causes of autism" (p. 229). John W. Robertson (2009) studied five major UK newspapers in the year 2006 and found that when news articles attempted to explain autism, they were far more likely to pose medical versus social causes (p. 19).

Autistic characters are now cast as protagonists on popular television shows and films, yet some scholarship reinscribes medical model approaches to autism. For instance, Nordahl-Hansen, Tøndevolda, and Fletcher-Watson (2017) analyze autism representation in 26 movies and TV shows through a psychiatric lens, applying the DSM-5 autism spectrum disorder diagnosis to autistic characters, and Draaisma (2009) analyzes film and memoir autism representation through Hans Asperger's original case studies of autistic boys. The representation

focus must shift from accuracy of medicalized diagnostic categories to embodiment of lived autistic experiences. By relying on medical model lenses, journalists stigmatize and perpetuate ableism against autistic people.

Because autism is culturally conceived of as a medical problem, it's not surprising that media portrayals of autism focus on a medical model. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) marked autism, Asperger disorder, pervasive developmental disorder—not otherwise specified, and childhood disintegrative disorder as separate yet related disabilities up until 2013, when the latest edition (DSM-5) debuted one diagnosis, autism spectrum disorder (McGuire, 2016, p. 51; Cooper, 2015, p. 5). According to Rachel Cooper (2015), who includes a brief case study of Asperger's in her analysis of how the DSM locks in disability definitions, the psychiatric distinction between Asperger's and autism related to verbal language (p. 5), yet diagnosticians couldn't reliably delineate differences between the autism diagnoses, which helped precipitate the change. Anne McGuire (2016) sees a continued medicalized perspective in the DSM's reimagining of autism as a pathological spectrum: "The concept of autism as a graded spectrum of impairment severities has become crucial to dominantly held contemporary understandings of the autistic body that narrate it as some 'thing' to be worked on, modified, and improved" (McGuire, 2016, p. 51). The problem shifts from finding the precise medical terminology to describe autism to interrogating the diagnostic language and process itself. "There is nothing neutral about the *DSM*," Eli Clare remarks while exploring the history of LGBTQIA identity pathologized and treated through psychiatry (2017, p. 140). Jordynn Jack (2012) notes that societies construct autism through medicalized lenses in both diagnostic language and causation theories, but "many individuals who identify as autistic ... have contested this scientific definition for its portrayal of autism in the medicalized language

of deficit and impairment" (p. 4). In choosing language in my content search and analysis, my intention is to follow disability scholars like Clare (2017), McGuire (2016), and Jack (2012), who question psychiatry's medicalized terminology as socially-constructed and privilege embodied autistic perspectives in naming disability.

Feminist disability studies scholar Michael Gill (2015) pinpoints a specific form of discrimination against disabled people's sexual agency which he terms *sexual ableism*. Gill explains, "Sexual ableism is the system of imbuing sexuality with determinations of qualification to be sexual based on criteria of ability, intellect, morality, physicality, appearance, age, race, social acceptability, and gender conformity" (2015, p.3). In his research on socially-constructed barriers to sexuality for people with intellectual disabilities, Gill demonstrates how cultural representations of disabled sexuality fluidly interact with structures of sexual ableism. According to Gill, racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and other systems of oppression prop up sexual ableism: "Notions about the ability to be sexual are intertwined with gendered, classed, and racialized assessments of fitness" (Gill, 2015, p. 17). People at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities face heightened discrimination. Paul Heilker (2012) demonstrates the systematic whitewashing of people of color in popular media by showing how autistic television and film characters and online imagery are almost entirely white, while autism discussions, from special education to online forums, build upon coded racism and implicit exclusion. Heilker argues that "what audiences learn from these discourses is that regardless of any other disagreements people might have about autism — what it is, what causes it, how we should think about it, how we should respond to it — autism is a relentlessly white condition" (2012, para. 19). Extending white masculinity and heterosexuality to normalize autistic sexuality reaffirms

racism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia and damages the many autistic people who don't fit into this narrow conception.

When journalists portray autistic people with sexual agency, they do so through restrictive means that reaffirm privileged social categories. Contrary to entrenched ideas that position autistic people as incapable of love, Angela Willey, Banu Subramaniam, Jennifer A. Hamilton, and Jane Couperus (2015) investigate how modern constructions of autistic people as potential lovers depend on heterosexuality, gender normativity, and whiteness (p. 371). They problematize how the recuperated sexuality of white heterosexual autistic men relies on "the erasure of queer implications and the eschewing of queer readings" (Willey, Subramaniam, Hamilton, & Couperus, 2015, p. 371). Rather than redefining love to be inclusive to autistic people, the authors argue that science and journalism fit autism into socially-acceptable categories, calling new media portrayals "an attempt to domesticate difference rather than embrace it. The new autistic subject does not expand our conceptions of love and loving but instead conforms to quite normative notions, naturalizing heterosexual coupling within the biological body" (Willey et al, 2015, p. 385).

Willey et al.'s argument speaks to Robert McRuer's (2006) notion of *compulsory able-bodiedness*. Drawing on queer theory and disability studies, McRuer positions nondisabled identity as a performative impossibility and interlocks cultural definitions of ability and sexuality, pointing out how both depend on cultural ideas of normalcy that are impossible to achieve: "Compulsory heterosexuality is intertwined with compulsory able-bodiedness; both systems work to (re)produce the able body and heterosexuality. But precisely because these systems depend on a queer/disabled existence that can never quite be contained, able-bodied heterosexuality's hegemony is always in danger of collapse" (McRuer, 2006, p. 31). As Willey et

al. tie together whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality as conditions for acceptable autistic sexuality, McRuer ties together able-bodiedness and heterosexuality as unachievable fictions that nonetheless wield great power in disabled and queer representations and lives. Extending compulsory able-bodiedness specifically to autism, Rachel Groner (2012) looks at autism and sexuality through autistic people's memoirs. Groner argues for queer readings of autistic narratives of sexuality because they "point to the fictiveness of NT [neurotypical] heteronormativity," explaining that "much of what renders ASD a 'disability' in the sexual realm arises from a perceived failure to read and correctly perform heteronormative codes of sexual behavior—or, from an intractable awareness of the illogic and arbitrariness of these codes" (2012, p. 270).

Queering autistic sexuality—whether as a theoretical framework or as an acknowledgement of LGBTQIA autistic identity—aids in the understanding not just of autism, romance, sexuality, and dating, but also to the wider construction of nondisabled, neurotypical, gender-normative heterosexuality. Jordynn Jack (2012) analyzed autistic people's talk about gender, sex, and sexuality across websites, blogs, memoirs, and autistic and trans-centric internet fora. Left out of "the cultural constructed identity of an autistic person—stereotypically a male," autistic women carve out and broaden autistic identity in their writing (Jack, 2012, p. 8). Jack found that autistic people conceptualize gender through language as "an expanded concept of autistic gender identity that pushes past a gender continuum toward a copia, in which terms can be tried on and appropriated, discarded, and invented while still being understood as embodied and constructed" (2012, p. 14). Narrow autism conceptions damage autistic women, nonbinary people, and transgender people, whose narratives challenge entrenched gender and sexual norms.

Romance and sexuality are mature topics, but the U.S. mainstream media denies disabled adulthood, infantilizing autism's public image through focusing on children, ignoring autistic adult voices, and legitimizing social barriers to autistic sexuality. Analyzing a Starbucks coffee cup's Autism Speaks message, the United Nations World Autism Awareness Day resolution, and a speech by President Obama, Anne McGuire (2016) points out how autism is conceptualized as "a state of being off-tempo with the normative meter of human development" (p. 104) and "a state of pathological underdevelopment" (p. 111). Because autistic temporality is positioned as inherently infantilizing, McGuire is not surprised that the coffee cup, resolution, and speech all refer to autistic people as children (2016, p. 117). Using a temporal lens, McGuire analyzes how autistic adulthood becomes dangerous:

Autism ... is framed as that risk which may—in the absence of biomedical control—potentially divert the normative, productive course of a time-rich child by causing them to squander their temporal wealth: by 'wasting' or 'losing' temporal riches with the rigid inefficiencies of 'developmental delays,' by arriving late (or not at all) to 'milestones' and so to productive and consumptive futures. (McGuire, 2016, p. 132)

Representations conceptualize autism as a disability that threatens the ableist notion of typical adulthood. Alison Kafer (2013) illuminates similar cultural anxieties around disability and adulthood while considering Ashley X, a nonspeaking girl with cerebral palsy whose parents and doctors hormonally stopped her growth then involuntarily sterilized her. Infantilization becomes a problem of imagined future bodies. At the core of the choices others made for Ashley about her body is disabled sexuality, which is considered not just expendable, but also fundamentally inappropriate for a person described by a bioethicist involved in her case as a "baby in a much larger body" (Kafer, 2013, p. 54). Kafer writes,

Within the logics of normative time, adults work, marry, and live independently; but according to [Ashley's doctors] Gunther and Diekema, disability renders too many of such practices impossible. As a result, the interventions can do no harm; she is already

prohibited by her disabilities from having romantic relationships (or children), so her breasts and uterus are easily removed. (2013, p. 54)

Relationships become equivalent to and a prerequisite for adulthood, systematically denied to disabled bodies which will never meet ableist ideals of development.

Infantilization is prevalent in media depictions of autism. While studying cultural autism imagery, Jennifer L. Stevenson, Bev Harp, and Morton Ann Gernsbacher (2011) found that 95% of images featured on autism support group websites were of children (para. 9); nine out of twelve top autism charities defined and described autism using language relating only to children (para. 12); and nearly four-fifths of U.S. autism news articles focused solely on autistic children (para. 23). When autistic adults do not receive as much media attention as autistic children do, adult issues like relationships and sexuality also receive less press. Reviewing 255 articles about autism from five British newspapers between 1999 and 2008, Jaci C. Huws and Robert S. P. Jones (2010) found that journalists excluded autistic adults as sources and subjects of autism news stories: "Adults with an autism diagnosis are rarely referred to, and autism is presented as a condition affecting children. As a consequence, autism appears to be infantilised" (Huws & Jones, 2010, p. 101). Willey et al. (2015) argue that the *New York Times* and NPR series "Autism, Grown Up" reshapes autism by working against infantilization. They believe that this media representation shows autism conceptions are going through a sort of cultural adolescence: "Not to make this passage would be not to grow up, to be fated to an eternal childhood, a fate once largely assumed to be sealed for those labeled autistic. This series directly addresses and defies this formulation, arguing that autists indeed grow up and so too must our understanding of autism" (Willey et al, 2015, p. 382). Gill (2015) notes that infantilization and ableist policies bolster each other: "Connected to the 'we know what's best' paternalism is the application of able-bodied standards to adults with intellectual disabilities, who are perceived as perpetual

children" (Gill, 2015, p. 3). Writing news stories about autism and sexuality will not erase infantilization unless we also fight against sexual ableism.

Methods

I employed Alan McKee's (2003) methodology of post-structuralist textual analysis, starting first with the category of autism and romance as a whole and then focusing on questions about constructions of adulthood, impairment, romance, sexuality, and identity in media discussions of autistic adults dating (McKee, 2003, pp. 138-139). To find texts to analyze, I conducted LexisNexis Academic searches using the terms "autism," "autistic," and "Asperger's" along with the words "dating," "romance," and "sexuality." The search focused on major U.S. newspapers including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Denver Post*, and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* for all available years. I sorted the articles first for relevance, omitting any duplications. Initially, I found 36 relevant results. I removed any piece from before the year 2000. I removed opinion pieces and advice columns because I was interested in how feature articles portrayed autism and sexuality. I chose not to analyze articles about disparate topics that separately or briefly mentioned search terms but did not focus on autism and sexuality. I also removed community event listings, crime reports, obituaries, and book, theater, and film reviews. My final sample included eleven feature articles that discussed autistic people and dating, romance, or sexuality.

Findings

When it comes to our love lives, the mainstream news media in the United States makes damaging assumptions about autistic adolescents and adults. Articles position autism as a medical condition leading to immature behavior and lack of empathy. Autism's dominant

description as distant, unemotional, disconnected, and infantile does not fit into conventional westernized concepts of romance, so autism and romance are presented as opposing forces. Because of the entrenched idea that autism and romance are opposites, news articles and film reviews impose an overcoming, supercrip narrative on autistic people who date, fall in love, and express themselves sexually. Journalists position autistic people's sexuality as disruptive and potentially threatening to family members and professionals. A heteronormative, gendered, and whitewashed discourse pervades autism news stories.

Infantilization

Feature articles that reference autism and dating, romance, or sexuality infantilize the autistic teenagers and adults at the center of their stories, pushing immaturity as a medicalized autism "symptom." One journalist sympathizes that Tarah P., a nondisabled teenager, must remind her older autistic twin brothers Justin and Jason to use deodorant, designating her as "not just their younger sister but their de facto older sister"; Tarah's mother calls her "mother hen to these boys" (Olsson, 2007, p. 42). Later in the same article, the journalist describes the 16-year-old twins, writing that "they sometimes seem like anxious 5-year-olds trapped in elongated bodies" (Olsson, 2007, p. 42). Infantilizing autism rhetoric not only shifts age-related roles of family, friends, and relationships, but also shifts autistic people of all ages into a restrictively-young category. An autism and higher education report describes autistic people as "inherently naïve students," negatively emphasizing autistic university students' supposedly-childlike behavior (Moore, 2006, p. 4A-28). An article about an autism and intellectual disability-specific sex education workshop continuously infantilizes autistic teenagers and adults by calling them "the children"—writing about "educating such children to limit sexual activities to their bedrooms" and quoting a social worker as calling autistic people "our guys" (Templeton, 2014,

p. C1). Infantilizing rhetoric judges steps toward independence as insufficient proof of impairment. Autistic people hold a tenuous relationship with the social construction of adulthood; sexual ableism mediates and limits participation in relationships and sexuality. By positioning autistic teenagers and adults as "naïve," "vulnerable," "like anxious 5-year-olds," and "children," the mainstream media reaffirms the noxious idea that autistic adults are eternal children—and therefore unsuitable romantic partners.

Empathy

Feature articles describe autistic people as lacking empathy. The press legitimizes theories and stereotypes of autistic people as unfeeling and inconsiderate. Journalists revert to stereotypical rhetoric which works jointly to naturalize autism as lack-of-empathy and to dehumanize autistic people based on a supposed lack of empathy. A feature about autistic girls and women reports, "No matter how much they want to connect, autistic girls are not good at empathy and conversation" (Bazelon, 2007, p. 38). Supposed lack of empathy is quickly and easily linked to intimacy issues. In the profile of an autistic couple, Jack and Kirsten, popular empathy rhetoric frames Jack's understanding of autism: "Jack became captivated by the idea of designing an empathy drug. ... He read all he could find on the hormone oxytocin, which has been linked to trust and social interaction. ... 'I wonder if I took it, whether I would be better at being affectionate,' he said" (Harmon, 2011b, p. A1). The journalist justifies the scarcity of relationship support for autistic people through the autism-empathy narrative: "Because they have a hard time grasping what another is feeling—a trait sometimes described as 'mindblindness'—many assumed that those with such autism spectrum disorders were incapable of, or indifferent to, intimate relationships" (Harmon, 2011b, p. A1). By stating that autistic

people lack empathy and then drawing the link between empathy and effective relationship skills, the mainstream media positions autistic people as undesirable romantic partners.

Romance and Autism as Opposing Forces

By first medicalizing autism and then defining autistic people as childish and lacking empathy, the mainstream media communicates the message that autism and romance are diametrically-opposed concepts. Autistic romance is often represented as an oxymoron. Sources for an adult diagnosis article claim that it is impossible to be autistic and to be in love:

“Almost by definition, an Asperger’s person would not form an intimate relationship, get married and have children,” says research scientist Katherine Tsatsanis of the Yale Developmental Disabilities Clinic. “They don’t form connections. The desire, the drive and the social knowledge is lacking.” (Leigh, 2007, p. 7D)

Clinicians bolster an image of autistic people as lonely and both incapable of and unlikely to want romance in their lives; one clinician explains that “forming close friendships and dating run counter to Asperger’s adults’ goals,” the second “says he has never known a parent with Asperger’s,” and the third “concur that an Asperger’s parent would be rare, and she knows of just one short-lived marriage” (Leigh, 2007, p. 7D). In an article about autistic girls and women, clinicians agree that romance and autism could not coexist: “While some men with Asperger’s marry and have families, women almost never do, psychiatrists observe” (Bazelon, 2007, p. 38). Willey et al. (2015) argue that this current juxtaposition is a relic of autism’s early and shifting definitions, calling “the absence of love ... not just a symptom but rather the problem itself” (p. 381). The historical perspective contextualizes how modern writers position romantic involvement as proof of lesser impairment and rely on harmful functioning language. In a transition to adulthood article, Justin C. befriends another autistic person, who “was considered higher-functioning than Justin. ... He had a girlfriend” (Harmon, 2011a, p. A1). This rhetoric

paints Justin C.'s friend as "less disabled" partially because of his partnership. The adult diagnosis article suggests that maintaining relationships might be grounds for removing the autism label: "Because some Asperger's adults are spouses and parents and have enduring careers, others suggest that the diagnostic criteria are being interpreted too loosely" (Leigh, 2007, p. 7D). Teenage twins Justin and Jason P. do not have social or romantic lives, but because they are autistic, their loneliness is normalized:

The gulf between kids with special needs and their siblings widens during adolescence, as the typical siblings begin to tie up the phone lines, venture off with friends and begin dating. ... Justin, more than his brother, wants to make friends. ... (He has also occasionally expressed a desire for a girlfriend and used to claim he had one named Crossfire.) "The boys get upset because Tarah and Melissa get to have friends over and go places, and they don't," Jennifer said. (Olsson, 2007, p. 42)

If Justin and Jason were nondisabled, it would seem out-of-place for their mother to justify their social isolation and desexualization. The "gulf" between romantically-involved siblings and lonely autistic people is portrayed as inherent in the impairment, instead of culturally-mediated by sexual ableism.

Journalists betray the clash between autism and romance through the rhetorical use of surprise. The special education transition program coordinator tells Justin C.'s parents that "Justin needed to spend time with fellow students, *even* [emphasis added] taking time to attend a class she was teaching on relationships and sexuality" (Harmon, 2011a, p. A1). When a social worker presents on sexuality to an autism support group, the audience includes "*even* [emphasis added] people with autism interested in gaining knowledge about the topic" (Templeton, 2014, p. C1). In an article about a college support program for students with developmental and learning disabilities, participant Matthew is "*even* [emphasis added] learning how to date"; the program counselors "*even* [emphasis added] dole out dating advice" (Sherry, 2007, p. B01). The word

"even" contains subtle surprise that can only exist in a society that sees autism and dating as mutually incompatible.

Articles portray autism and romance as opposing forces, leading to an overreliance on supercrip narratives. Celebrating how a person "overcame" autism to successfully date or marry is a prime example of the supercrip model (Haller, 2000, p. 275). Since autism and romance are constructed as an impossible pairing, the news media represents autistic romantic partners as heroes who battle against autism to participate in dating and sexuality. "Autism Doesn't Stop Graduate," announces the headline of one article, which profiles an autistic football player and college graduate. Travis chooses to disclose his autism "'on a need-to-know basis,' starting with the young woman he was dating" (Fuoco, 2014, p. W1). Travis is positioned in a classic supercrip portrayal as successful not because of being autistic, but despite it.

Jack and Kirsten's profile portrays the autistic young people as succeeding in their romantic relationship against all odds: "The months that followed Jack and Kirsten's first night together show how daunting it can be for the mindblind to achieve the kind of mutual understanding that so often eludes even nonautistic couples" (Harmon, 2011b, p. A1). Not only is their relationship "daunting" (and harder than those of "nonautistic couples"), but also it involves a lot of "trying": "They found ways to negotiate sex, none of them perfect. They kept trying" (Harmon, 2011b, p. A1). An article about autistic adult David and the documentary *Aspie Seeks Love* which stars him portrays autistic love lives as balancing acts that involve trying, if not always succeeding: "He tries to find a meaningful relationship and success as a writer, all while navigating a late-in-life Asperger's syndrome diagnosis" (Byko, 2015, p. E1). An article about autistic couple Dave and Lindsey's relationship positions autistic romance as harder work: "They've had to work at it, as they both have autism spectrum disorder, a neurological condition

that can make communication and social and emotional interaction more complicated and difficult" (Bonos, 2016, p. E01). According to this supercrip narrative, one of the ways that autistic people may achieve romantic fulfillment is through therapeutic intervention. For instance, the article about the sex education workshop quotes the executive director of a local autism organization as saying that "they can develop individual relationships with encouragement and some structure" (Templeton, 2014, p. C1). The supercrip model aligns with Rosqvist's (2014) *sexual education discourse*, which frames autistic people as "sexually deficient but teachable to become sexual in a socially acceptable way" (p. 352).

Language of war and battle adds to the feeling that autistic people are overcoming insurmountable problems just by existing or perhaps going on a date. Surveying the cultural artifacts she had collected, Anne McGuire (2016) hones in on "the militaristic rhetoric that permeated ... autism representations" (p. 20), writing,

Autism is commonly narrated as a terrifying and terrorizing enemy, threatening innocent children and destroying the 'good life.' That autism must be 'combated,' 'fought,' 'defeated,' 'smothered,' and ultimately 'eliminated' is written into US law, institutionalized in public policy, and sung throughout popular culture. (p. 20)

The college support program article includes multiple such war references: Matthew has had "countless ups and downs with medication and emotional tumult, battles with his family and friends", and he "battled serious bouts of anger" (Sherry, 2007, p. B01). Matthew's "struggle with Asperger syndrome, a form of autism, dominated his childhood" (Sherry, 2007, p. B01). Militarized rhetoric positions not only autism but also romance as enemies of autistic people. Jack and Kirsten's profile portrays relationship participation as "the more treacherous work of forging intimacy" (Harmon, 2011b, p. A1). In the adult diagnosis article, one autistic man's 40-year marriage is described as having "weathered decades of turmoil but is now calm"

(Leigh, 2007, p. 7D). By pitting autism and romance against each other, mainstream media articles about autistic adults dating follow the supercrip model of disability media representation.

Narrow Conceptions

When autistic adults do seek or find intimacy, the mainstream media presents narrow messages about autistic sexuality. The mainstream media whitewashes autism. None of the feature articles mention autistic people's race and ethnicity, discuss racism in autism communities, or analyze how white privilege interacts with autistic identity. By avoiding race and how it impacts disability, sexuality, and other identities, these news articles contribute to the overall erasure of autistic people of color and reflect the lack of mainstream discussion about autism and race. Autistic relationships are portrayed as heterosexual. References to dating and relationships—Justin C. dating Paloma, Justin P. desiring and inventing a girlfriend, Travis dating a woman, Jack and Kirsten, Dave and Lindsey—are coded as straight. Eight out of eleven feature articles note heterosexual relationships. Professionals quoted in articles make heterosexual assumptions about their autistic teenage and adult clients. Advice gathered at the sex education workshop includes "Yes, boys can look at girls and women but for no more than the three Mississippi's"; the social worker "does suggest that parents provide boys with a girlie magazine for use exclusively in the bedroom" (Templeton 2014, p. C1).

The news conflates heterosexuality and gender-normativity, tying them to attempts to assimilate autistic people into mainstream romance narratives. At a dating presentation, Kirsten advises, "I found people don't flirt with me if I wear big man pants and a rainbow sweatshirt" (Harmon, 2011b, p. A1). Because of the queer potential for autistic sexuality, both theoretically and literally, it's noticeable when the only allowable disabled expression is heterosexual. Autistic sexuality is undeniably gendered, viewed through a masculine lens that permeates general autism

discussion. Six out of eleven articles featured boys or men as the face of autism, two of eleven featured girls or women (and one of the articles was about autistic girls and women!), and three articles featured men and women. None of the articles openly discussed nonbinary or transgender autistic people. The autistic girls and women article reaffirms autism's place of imagined masculinity: "Autism is often thought of as a boys' affliction" (Bazelon, 2007, p. 38). The sex education workshop article offers more information on boys and relies on sexuality stereotypes: "Boys and girls alike, but primarily boys, begin masturbating and engaging in sexual fantasizing" (Templeton, 2014, p. C1).

Disruptive Sexuality

The mainstream media sends a strong message that autistic sexuality is disruptive and dangerous. In the higher education report, autistic students and their sexuality are portrayed as causing problems for college staff, administrators, and fellow students by introducing "tricky issues to ... the dating scene": "Women on the spectrum are especially vulnerable sexually and emotionally, since they have problems deciphering intentions. Men are at risk, too, misreading clear signals of rejection ('I'm busy'); instead, they might pursue a romance until a confrontation results" (Moore, 2006, p. 4A-28). The gendered disability narrative follows Kim Sauder's (2017) observation that mainstream discourses about sex workers and disability largely avoid disabled women's sexuality, promulgating the dual myth that "[disabled] men are in some way entitled to sex while ... disabled women having sex or seeking sex may be in and of itself cause for concern" (para. 20). The sex education article also paints a grim picture of disabled sexuality as dangerous. A social worker warns caregivers that if they do not talk about sex with their autistic children, "it can get bad" (Templeton, 2014, p. C1). Furthermore, the article describes autistic sexuality as inherently predatory, saying that "boys with autism can be prone to walking around

with erections, staring at women's chests, rubbing against people or improperly touching other people. Some become obsessed with pornography or begin stalking girls whom they mistakenly think are interested in them" (Templeton, 2014, p. C1).

In McRuer's (2006) analysis of Melvin from the film *As Good as It Gets* (1997), Melvin's characterization "parallels other cultural representations of people with disabilities: his disability (the anomalous behavior for which he has been diagnosed and which sets him apart from other people) is conflated with his character flaws (his bigotry)" (p. 23). By attributing predatory actions to autism, journalists reaffirm negative myths about autistic people's dangerous sexuality while simultaneously failing to hold autistic people accountable for sexual harassment or assault. These representations of disruptive sexuality also fit in with Groner's observations:

Even a casual survey of clinical, medical, and education literature reveals that sexual behaviors are to be discouraged or "managed" among autistic people, especially those who live in group homes or institutional settings. The language of these and other texts, popular and scholarly, assumes that all people with ASD ... are or should be asexual, presumably because their sexuality is inappropriate and potentially harmful to others. (Groner, 2012, p. 263)

Autistic adults are also portrayed as emotionally damaging to those around them. The adult diagnosis article explains that autism often "doesn't come to light until a spouse or adult child seeks therapy for depression or poor self-esteem that results from the coldness and egocentricity Asperger's adults demonstrate in relationships" (Leigh, 2007, p. 7D).

Autistic adults are considered too aberrant to partner with nonautistic adults. However, autistic people are considered the perfect partners for each other. This theme continues throughout the articles, showing up not only through the presumed difficulty of maintaining a romantic relationship between an autistic partner and a nonautistic partner, but also through the strong message that those who appear similarly-impaired are perfect matches for one another, while not necessarily good enough for nondisabled romantic or sexual attention. Dave and

Lindsey's profile claims, "The main thing bringing them together, they say, is their shared disability" (Bonos, 2016, p. E01).¹ Before dating Jack, Kirsten's ex-boyfriend is described as "an unlikely match—a charismatic extrovert with soulful blue eyes who thrived on meeting new people" (Harmon, 2011b, p. A1). By labeling him as an "unlikely match" and thus the opposite of a typical autistic person, the article constructs autistic people as introverted, unfriendly, unappealing, and possibly soulless. At a romance presentation, Kirsten says, "Parents always ask, 'Who would like to marry my kid? They're so weird,' ... But, like, another weird person, that's who" (Harmon, 2011b, p. A1). As part of sexual ableism, Gill (2015) notes that people with intellectual disabilities face conditions when it comes to expressing sexuality; for instance, sexuality is acceptable "only *if* the individual is sexual with another person with an intellectual disability" (p. 19). There is nothing wrong with disabled people dating one another, as long as this partnership choice is theirs. However, pushing the idea that autistic people can and should only date one another perpetuates sexual ableism.

Conclusions

Autism and romance occupy a space of discomfort in mainstream media conversation. News articles about autism and romance demonstrate that journalists medicalize and infantilize autism and portray autistic people as unable to empathize. By defining autism as a medical impairment that causes immature behavior and lack of empathy, the mainstream media forms the concept of a disability that directly opposes romance. After positioning autistic people as inherently opposed to romance and sexuality, news articles often portray autistic people as supercrips who overcome the difficulties of autism to participate in intimate relationships. When

¹ The article originally read "their shared disorder" and now reads "their shared disability," reflecting a shift to less-medicalized language.

autistic sexuality is portrayed, journalists rely on heterosexual and gender-normative language. Race and ethnicity are vastly avoided, contributing to a whitewashed idea of autism. Autistic sexuality is viewed as disruptive and potentially dangerous to nonautistic people, whether partners or support providers. The only suitable partner, following this mainstream discourse, is another autistic person.

Holton, Farrell, and Fudge (2014) posit that "media may simultaneously help to construct our understanding of a societal issue and to act as an artifact of the way our society views that issue" (p. 195). The mainstream media in the United States reflects and upholds the sexual ableism that impacts autistic adults' access to sexual agency. Draaisma (2009) warns that negative stereotypes about emotions could impact autistic people in the criminal justice system: "The unrealistic stereotype of autistic savants having supercomputers for brains ... may create the myth of autistic persons having no feelings. In the realm of talent this may have no harmful implications, but in the realm of forensics this myth could have grave consequences" (p. 1479). Media portrayals of disabled adults as babies and children lead to presumed lack of ability to access romance and sexuality, with material consequences for autistic people. Even with a sordid history of eugenic sterilization, infantilization continues to be used to justify forced sterilization and other violence against disabled bodies (Clare, 2017, p. 155). Kafer (2013) writes that Ashley X's sterilization is "a surgical manifestation of the conceptualization of Ashley as a permanent child. As a child, Ashley has no need of reproductive organs; as a disabled person, she has no sexuality" (p. 57).

Ableism and other systemic oppression are interrelated phenomena. In terms of whitewashing autism, Heilker (2012) asks us to question "to what extent ... the rhetoric of autistic whiteness drive[s] public policies and laws that empower citizens or control their access

to economic and political power" (para. 19). He brings up ways in which racism and limited media representation negatively influence autistic people of color in schools, workplaces, social services, and criminal justice systems. Despite the innovative viewpoint that queer autistic sexuality can bring to constructions of gender, sexuality, and disability, autistic sexuality is heterosexualized. Nonbinary and trans autistic people create media, contribute to scholarship, and seek relationships, yet LGBTQIA autistic people are too often written out of the story.

Beyond broadening media coverage of disabled sexuality, Eli Clare (2009) advocates for dismantling policies that infantilize and desexualize disabled people:

Behind the current lack of images of disabled people and our sexuality is our real, actual, institutionalized asexuality. All the same forces that relegate disabled adults to a perpetual childhood also shape us as asexual. Sheltered employment, protective paternalism, and restrictive legislation make discovering and developing the sense of an autonomous self, much less a sexual self, difficult at best. (Clare, 2009, p. 138)

It's not just a problem of reporting, but also of the conditions about which journalists report.

Discussing autistic sexuality in mass media remains taboo, yet autistic writers have long been advocating for access to intimacy; addressing intersectionality; and creating our own media that challenges autism stereotypes. Narratives like *All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism*, an anthology created by autistic people of color, combine these objectives and push advocacy beyond rights toward justice (Brown, Onaiwu, & Ashkenazy, 2017).

Journalists can embrace social model and neurodiversity frameworks and include autistic people as expert sources, publications can work to dissolve the barriers that autistic writers face in achieving broad readership, and disability activism can prioritize the fight against sexual ableism. Only then will we finally read accurate reflections of ourselves as loving adults.

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