Autism in Comics: How a Paradigm Shift from a Medical Model to a Social Model is Painting a More Inclusive Portrayal of Autism*

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Abstract

A paradigm shift in framing the autism condition from a medical perspective to a more social model in the real world, is being mirrorred in the printed page -- comics.

Keywords: Autism; Comics

INTRODUCTION

As a comic book writer, I mainly explore themes that are supernatural and folkloric in nature. However, in 2020, under our publisher Komiket, my illustrator-husband and I were able to release Doobiedoo Asks, a graphic novel unlike those we've produced before in that it is the first non-fiction we have ever worked on. In it, we describe our family's autism journey of discovery and eventual acceptance and understanding of the autism condition (Eloriaga-Amago & Amago, 2020).

Locally, Doobiedoo Asks has been hailed as the "first Filipino book about ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) which addresses itself to both ASD and NT (Neurotypical) families" (M. Tobias-Papa, personal communication, September 14, 2021), but in the course of my researching for my "Autism in Comics" talk delivered during the UPSLIS Webinar series last October 2021, I discovered that autism portrayal in Western comics is not anything new (Eloriaga-Amago, 2021). And though the portrayals prove controversial at first, throughout the years, the paradigm shift in the real world was reflected onto the paneled pages as well.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Comics is combining text and images to tell a story through sequential panels.

The Medical Definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) "is a complex

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developmental condition involving persistent challenges with social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behavior. While autism is considered a lifelong disorder, the degree of impairment in functioning because of these challenges varies between individuals with autism" (American Psychiatric Association, 2021, What is Autism Spectrum Disorder? section).

The term "disorder" carries a negative connotation. It suggests something "wrong" or quite simply, that which is "out of the usual order" of things. Therefore, among autism communities and advocates there has been a shift to the social model, this includes consciously adopting the use of more inclusive language.

The discourse on autism has been centered on it being a disorder and an inadequacy making people with autism less than human—and this has to be tackled through the social model of disability (Woods, 2017).

ASD WITHIN THE SOCIAL MODEL

According to Sarah Birge of the Pennsylvania State University:

> *The growing field of disability studies largely rejects the dominance of this medical model and instead considers disability within a social-constructionist framework. Under the social model, a physical or cognitive impairment only becomes a disability when society fails to fully include the person, who may face obstacles such as physical barriers, prejudice, or exclusion from social justice. (Birge, 2010, "Disability Studies and the Emphasis on the Physical" section)*

The paradigm shift involves changing the focus from an autistic person's deficits and difficulties (medical) and concentrating instead on building up their strengths, so that they can function as individuals and as productive members of society (social). This shifts the responsibility of providing accommodations and adjustments not on the autistic individual, but onto society. Or in other words, "inclusion."

IDENTIFIED VS. CLAIMED

Within mass media, we have characters that are "claimed" to be autistic by the autism community, and we have characters that are clearly "identified" as such within the narrative (Baron, 2017). For example, in the 1988 film Rain Man, it is mentioned in the movie that the Dustin Hoffman character, Raymond Babbit, is autistic (identified). Whereas, Lizbeth Salander in the Millennium series (2005-2019) of books and films has been "claimed" as being autistic because of characteristics autistic persons can identify with.

AUTISM PORTRAYAL IN COMICS

According to "Waiting for Autistic Superman: On Autistic Representation in Superhero Comics" by Robert Rozema (2020) and published in Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture, "The first explicitly named autistic character to appear in a superhero comic is Dehman Doosha (a.k.a. Johnny Do), a paranormal teenager who appeared in Psi Force, one of the eight Marvel titles created for the short-lived New Universe" (p. 12) which ran from 1986-1989.

A character with extremely awesome powers, but was portrayed as flawed because of his autism, Dehman was eventually lobotomized to get rid of the autism but leaving intact the more desirable pyrokinesis powers. It speaks volumes, doesn't it? That autism is seen as a flaw, but a destructive power like pyrokinesis is celebrated.

Then "in two fairly recent Fantastic Four series, Reed Richards [or Mr. Fantastic] has been overtly identified as autistic: first, in Grant Morrison's Marvel Knights: Fantastic Four 1234 in 2001-2002; and second, in Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa's Season One origin story in 2012" (Rozema, 2020, p. 26).

In the pivotal moment, Richards' dialogue reads, "I've self-diagnosed a mild case of autism, for which I'm currently inventing a cure. Otherwise, Alyssa, I assure you, I'm of sound mind" (Aguirre-Sacasa & Marquez, 2012, p. 4).

Not only does Mr. Fantastic imply that autism is akin to insanity ("I'm of sound mind"), but he also reacts to it as if autism is a medical anomaly that has to be "cured."

Before these controversial issues were released, Mr. Fantastic—portrayed as singularly focused on the pursuit of science and exhibiting hints of being socially awkward—was a superhero celebrated and claimed by the autism community. One can imagine then, the uproar and anger these particular issues caused when the character was finally identified as being autistic.

Eloriaga-Amago, B. (2022). Autism in comics: How a paradigm shift from a medical model to a social model is painting a more inclusive portrayal of autism. *Philippine Journal of Librarianship and Information Studies, 42*(2), 5–9.

It needs to be stressed that autism is not a disease (refer to definitions above.) So there is no cure, but it is however, a lifelong condition that requires accommodations for impairments being experienced by the individual.

Dave Kot, creator of Face Value Comics said that other comic books that have featured characters with ASD "either shelved the characters or the characters were portrayed as criminals with dysfunctional behavior" (Muzikar, 2017, para. 28).

Perhaps in reaction to his observation, in 2014, he created Michael, whom he touts as "the first hero with the disorder among comic books" ("Comic Book Stars World's First Hero with Autism," 2014, para. 2). Michael's powers include "a mathematical mind, artistic gifts and an abundance of compassion" (para. 2).

The comic's plot revolves around "social issues such as curing disease, stopping hunger, and creating a society with economic parity" (Muzikar, 2017, para. 29). In Issue #1, Michael's parents tell him "Feel safe, feel wanted, and you'll be successful." Echoing the basic desire of inclusion: to not be viewed as different or as "the other" (para. 30).

From Dehman Doosha and Reed Richards to Michael, we see a shift from viewing autism as a medical anomaly to a condition that needs to be addressed collectively as a society.

But apart from the superhero genre, biographic comics are less sensationalist when it comes to depicting autism. Here are two examples. *The Ride Together* (2003) is a memoir describing creators Paul and Judy Karasik's experiences growing up with their autistic brother, David. While *Circling Normal* is a collection of strips which follows the experiences of a multiracial American family whose son Seth is diagnosed with autism at the age of two (Montague-Reyes, 2007).Their charm lies in their "ability to depict the complicated and communal experience of disability as shared by an entire family" (Birge, 2010, Autism in Comics section, para. 8).

> *Through their reworking of stereotypes and their unique portrayals of autism, Circling Normal and The Ride Together demonstrate the power of comics to rewrite (and redraw) traditional scripts of cognitive disability and break the confining cultural framework through which some people are seen and others overlooked (Birge, 2010, "Abstract" section).*

On the local front, in 2009, artist Gabby Atienza released "My Life as a Comic Book," an autobiography detailing his life journey with Asperger's Syndrome. In it, he mainly shows the difficulties he had, growing up misunderstood by both peers and even family, because this was the 1970s-1980s and the autism condition was still largely unfamiliar to most.

Fast forward, however, to the 2020s, and while most people by now are familiar with autism, our son's experiences show however, that the condition is still largely misunderstood.

When my son was in the third grade, suddenly the friends he had known since they were toddlers started avoiding him, his teachers started reprimanding him daily, until one day, he came home in tears and asked us, "Why don't they want to be friends with me anymore? What's wrong with me?" That same year, he was diagnosed with high-functioning autism or what was called Asperger's Syndrome before.

While a majority of us are already aware about autism as a condition, acceptance and accommodations geared towards people with autism are still lacking, mainly due to a lack of understanding. The negative experiences he had at school was due to his teacher not being equipped enough to provide an individualized plan of action for his needs, opting instead to isolate him from the rest of the class and exacerbating the feeling of being "othered."

I felt that my son's experiences, as well as that of artist Mr. Gabby Atienza and countless autistic individuals before them, are easily avoidable if only there is an abundance of understanding about the condition. Hence, I chose comics as a medium to break stereotypes surrounding autism. The format is appealing and accessible to readers of all ages and backgrounds. Comics has the potential to reach as wide an audience as possible.

Indeed, we have received feedback from people of diverse backgrounds: both comics and non-comics fans, parents, teachers, PWD's, non-professionals and professionals including dentists, therapists, and nurses, and even children. Their feedback includes finally understanding how to deal with a loved one on

the spectrum or how to best help out a friend or a patient who has the condition.

HOW COMICS CAN HELP PERSONS WITH AUTISM

In my experience attending and exhibiting at numerous comic book conventions, I found that a lot of people on the spectrum are attracted to the medium. Whether it's the way the panels are structured or that it doesn't have intimidating walls of text, there's something about comics that they find attractive and appealing. Beyond this, reading comics can actually prove beneficial, not only to autistics, but to people with other reading and/or learning difficulties as well.

> *Comic books don't intimidate struggling readers with an overwhelming page of text. They usually offer short and easy-to-read sentences, alongside other visual and text cues (e.g. character sighs, door slams etc.) for context. They're also helpful for children with learning difficulties; children with autism can learn a lot about identifying emotions through the images in a comic book. Children with dyslexia, who may find it frustrating to finish a page in a traditional book, often feel a sense of accomplishment when they complete a page in a comic book. ("The Awesome Benefits of Comic Books for Kids," 2015, "2. They give struggling readers confidence" section)*

Therefore, "they give struggling readers confidence" for context.

HOW LIBRARIES CAN HELP PERSONS WITH AUTISM

Have a comic book and graphic novel section.

As stated in the previous section, there are countless benefits to reading comics. Moreover, "Comic books that explore or touch on historical events, classic tales, wildlife, nature, positive relationships and more can provide a valuable supplement to other areas of learning" ("The Awesome Benefits of Comic Books for Kids," 2015, "5. They can be a valuable accompaniment" section).

Be sensory-friendly.

Silence and structure, these two things help make the library a safe space for PWA's (Person With Autism) or people who experience sensory overload. However, a designated sensory-friendly area can help make the library even more appealing. From having a room with muted lighting to offering the use of noise-cancelling headphones, there are many measures library staff can take to help autistic patrons.

As suggested in the article "Serving Autistic Library Users: Fostering Inclusion While Meeting Individual Needs" (2018), written by Eric Edwards of the Illinois State Library:

> *...There are a few steps that all libraries can take as a starting point to meet their mission to make their spaces and services as inclusive as possible. These include addressing any issues relating to noise and lighting, which ... affect many autistic patrons. ... A map of the library, or signage that is color-coded, is a good first step. (p. 20)*

Understand that one size does not fit all.

It is inevitable, most especially in an academic library, that a librarian will come across an autistic patron. However, exposure to misrepresentation in media and stereotypes may render the librarian unable to properly address the needs of an autistic person.

> *...It might be helpful for a library to consider how improving services for autistic patrons fits into the broader goal of making libraries more accessible and friendly for differently abled users in general. ... Regardless of library type, size, or location, it is likely that multiple users will visit who are differently abled and may face significantly varying challenges in navigating the library space. ... One challenge in recognizing the needs of autistic patrons is that it can often be a "hidden" condition, and the steps a library needs to take may not be as obvious as those for accommodating patrons in wheelchairs, for instance. (Edwards, 2018, p. 21)*

Just as important as offering a sensory-friendly environment is sensitivity training for librarians and staff. Institutions may contact the Autism Society Philippines (ASP; http://www.autismsocietyphilippines.org), which conducts trainings and seminars for free upon request.

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