

Representation and Disability in Media: *The Good Doctor*

Katie Sardonia

Berry College

COM 418 (Gender, Race, Class, and Media)

Dr. Kimberly Field-Springer

November 22, 2022

INTRODUCTION

Nielsen Media Company, an organization that manages “audience response, data, and insights” conducted a study in July 2022 on the representation of disability in media entitled, *Closing the Inclusion Gap for People with Disabilities*. In this study, the company was analyzing films and television shows (released over a span of the past 100 years) that encompassed representations of disability by way of thematic elements. Of the 164,000 media pieces that were examined, only 6,895 titles, about 4.2%, were deemed to be heavily highlighting this minority within the piece at all. (2022). The term “Diversity and Inclusion” has become more prevalent than ever, leading to an increased awareness, educational resources, and willingness to challenge current social practices. However, the social construct of disability is often overlooked. Regarding Diversity and Inclusion, some like to call it “the invisible D” because it is considered an “afterthought” in particular social circles that are focused on minority issues that get spoken of (a significant amount) more. This is not to say that those issues do not matter, because they do, significantly. The issue with representation in the realm of disability is that the majority of individuals with (uniquely apparent) disabilities are not physically or mentally able to articulate what life is like and advocate for what they desire. Therefore, an overall lack of education and knowledge is present for others that want to aid in this process of bringing disability to the forefront, alongside other sectors of diversity and inclusion worldwide. Individuals must glean what they do know from other sources, which are, most likely, a variety of medical professionals. Those who are immersed in the medical community have a remarkable grasp of the nuances of disability and typical attributes of each one, but still cannot grasp them wholly because they, themselves, do not have these characteristics as a part of one’s identity that can be

DISABILITY AND REPRESENTATION IN MEDIA: *THE GOOD DOCTOR*

both suddenly apparent (“caught” or “shown”) and unescapable. It becomes a complicated balancing act, especially in media, to rightly portray characters who have a disability as part of who they are, because it requires a degree of “taking on” the disability as a drastic lifestyle change. “Taking on” is not an easy process, and does not display the “full scope” of how a disabled individual navigates society daily. Because of this, individuals (and society, generally) prefer to leave “disability” out of the picture. It is intentional, but not purposefully meant to be derogatory. Society does not know how to do this minority “justice” in the way of media. Thus, the minority is not shown in big ways to widespread audiences through any form of media. As a disabled individual myself, I constantly seek to bring media to light that highlights disability in any context. Through this paper, I intend to analyze how these representations are integrated in media because it is not discussed adequately enough, even living in this era of becoming acutely aware of others. This notion of “living in a bubble” comes to mind, and begs the question “Do we, as a society, want to live in one anymore?” Over the years, representations of disability have increased wholeheartedly, particularly through various television series. Any type of visual media is powerful, but when relevant issues are integrated into the storytelling sphere, it can become something unforgettable. Most recently, the ABC network has been beginning to venture into this “world” of representation of disability in terms of television dramas. A show on the network stood out entitled *The Good Doctor*, stood out unlike any other because it focuses on a main character with a disability who is positively impacting his environment and those that surround him, instead of being a supporting character that is clearly “thrown into the mix” for the sake of inclusivity. This avenue of displaying diversity in a television show takes shape in the form of “comedic relief” in which other characters “make fun” of the individual for being disabled. This can be seen by way of exploitation of the ways the character make receive

DISABILITY AND REPRESENTATION IN MEDIA: *THE GOOD DOCTOR*

assistance (riding in wheelchair/electronic scooter “recklessly,” making cheeky comments like, “at least I can _____”) *The Good Doctor* first aired in 2017, detailing the life of an autistic doctor, Shaun Murphy, who also has savant syndrome and the challenges he faces due to his disability. Additionally, the show features Murphy’s support system that (actively) supports him, with subordinate characters, Dr. Claire Browne and Lea Dilallo. In this venture, I chose to specifically analyze the pilot episode of the show, because it introduces viewers to Murphy’s point of view from the second the episode starts. As the show progresses, audiences “get to know” Murphy and how he interacts with others, but also that his individual capability expands others perception of it. This aspect is particularly important to note in the (explanatory) connection with my research and the show because perception of disability, both in and out of the show context. That said, the overarching purpose in all of this is to see how *The Good Doctor* serves as a representation of the “disabled community,” despite not one individual’s journey looking identical to the other. Ultimately, my research question is this: **How is the disabled community represented in *The Good Doctor* and is it an adequate representation of the minority to others?**

I will attempt to initiate discussion on this topic on behalf of the disabled community, with the goal of increasing comfortability and familiarity for others that might not be as open to it. Others are often hesitant to contribute because they fear doing the “wrong” thing with the “wrong” intention. Representation (in media) has and continues to be a learning process, but the first step is being willing to listen and speak with the knowledge that one can do so without being invalidated. When this occurs, the stigma surrounding (and within) the disabled community will cease. However, full integration into society (as in “bridging to the gap” between “disabled” vs. “others” to an “us” and “we” language) is ideal. The impact I hope to have by conducting this

research is to “pull back the curtain” on disability and representation in media through *The Good Doctor*. Additionally, this will allow for conversations to continue for those who may not feel as though they can speak to it due to a lack of authentic expertise or education regarding the disabled minority.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Representation of disabilities in media has been few and far between, even with the increasing emphasis on inclusivity in recent years. It has remained a subject that is overlooked and not normalized in the “mainstream” flow of content output, simply because those in that position who long to see themselves on screen more than likely do not have the literal ability to do so. Because they themselves do not have the stamina to speak up, it is often an able-bodied individual advocating on their behalf. The difficult concept to grasp is that able bodied individuals are not willing to be representatives for those who struggle.

This is, in part, due to the perception that assisting people with disabilities is a waste of time, because it does not coherently impact their lives, per mass media imagery. Many television shows and films depict people with challenges as individuals who exist just to make other characters seem more empathetic, helpful, and kind, further deepening the able-bodied character but not the disabled one. This is because producers, writers, and others that prompted the creation of this content do not know how to approach developing a character of this nature. Instead of accommodating someone who can provide insight, companies choose to go the easier route and hire someone who they know can “take on” a disability, but will not require any additional, unique care. Due to this methodology, audiences repeatedly see individuals with challenges on television and in film in a stereotypical light—as the outcast, comedic relief, or the dreamer. It is a very rare occurrence to find media with a disabled main character with a

developed personality and interests as the show (or film) continues, and *The Good Doctor* is an excellent example of this instance. Ultimately, it is a cheaper, less intensive process for companies to follow through with, but the question lingers: Do these representations (that are currently in the mass media sphere) depict disability accurately?

According to *Consuming Image: How Mass Media Impact the Identity of People with Disabilities*, author Lingling Zhang highlights how people with disabilities, overall, have a sense of negativity towards films and television series that feature disabled characters, even in a (somewhat) positive fashion. She notes that that people do feel a sense of hope and motivation when they see another (with a disability) achieve an “unattainable” feat and receive recognition for exceeding expectations. However, the author does accentuate the more that “less desirable” aspects of disability are brought to the attention of audiences, the more that the confidence of those in the disabled community drops. (2013.) This tendency likely stems from the use of assumptions from able bodied people about those in the disabled community, which, in turn, creates the opportunity for dramatic overgeneralizations.

Within this overgeneralization, disability has historically been showcased through characters in a villainous fashion—they are never the “hero”, but an individual that motivates other characters to remove themselves from the situation they find themselves in. Characters who are drastically different from an audience member’s expectation are present to make them uncomfortable and highlighting disability has been a simple avenue to create that discomfort. According to *Escaping the “Evil Avenger” and the “Supercrip” : Images of Disability in Popular Television*, author Allison Harnett describes the “irredeemable villain” and “remarkable achievers” in the context of disability. (2000.) She points out that in this dichotomy, a disabled person is either seeking revenge because of their onset struggle or seeking approval from others for overcoming said

onset struggle. Either way, these characters are constantly hungry for attention from others which has reinforced the idea that people with increased need desire to be dependent on others. It is because of instances such as these that make it impossible to escape for any kind of stigma surrounding disability to be wholly and utterly removed.

The aspect of the stigma surrounding disability that is most commonly widespread is the ideology that the disabled individual desires ultimate healing. This ideology of “ultimate healing” was dismantled significantly in *The Good Doctor* but continues to be widely projected to audiences currently. According to *From Freaks to Savants: Disability and hegemony from The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1939) to Sling Blade (1997)*, author Fiona Whittington-Walsh emphasizes the importance of having a production team that believes in giving individuals with disabilities the space to participate in the process just as they are. She notes that individuals such as this experience lonely-ness and isolation, not of their own accord, but by the way they are classified in society—that they did not choose. The author displayed the filmmaking journey of Tod Browning, who forged ahead with working directly with individuals with disabilities, despite the gravely negative opinions of others in *Freaks*. (2002). Because of his empathetic willingness, Browning was able to feature this diverse sector in a way that gave them a voice, and an opportunity to let them speak for themselves. In fact, this film directly spoke of the stereotypical mentality that people inherently have towards this group. In turn, this allowed able bodied individuals to reevaluate their perspective and disengage from their own “gaze of perfection”.

As the topic of disability becomes harder to ignore, the pressure from individuals to speak out in any way that they can is present. With this pressure comes the (self-imposed) obligation to educate or justify on their lived experiences to able bodied individuals—as if ignorance will

disappear if one voice demands a place at the table. While that may not happen overnight, it is significant to start the conversation, even if it is unearthing insecurity and facing reality as it stands. According to *Disability Media Participation: Opportunities, Obstacles, and Politics*, author Katie Ellis depicts what the implications of a “participatory culture” are—and they are all positive. “Participatory culture” has increased dramatically, especially as technological improvements continue to impact how one interacts with another. No longer do conversations have to be centered around limitations—they can be normalized with the help of technology. (2015). These conversations, as they have begun to take place, have been most successful in “grass roots”, niche social media communities, and they have, not only impacted the approach that has been taken to do the “disability discussion” justice, but encouraged those in the disabled community that their lives matter.

Though disability, especially through media, is becoming easier for audiences to integrate into “mainstream” ideology, the emotional piece is something that is not linear, making it difficult for others to *truly* empathize to the fullest extent. For individuals with disabilities, it is hard to articulate, even if they are an outspoken advocate—in part because it is deeply personal. It is hard to be called “not normal” in a society that is motivated by familiarity. It is hard to accept differences when all individuals desire is to stick beside others who look, and act like them. It is hard to live in a world not made for you. According to *Disability, Media, and the Politics of Vulnerability*, author Gerard Goggin discusses the social impact of experiencing vulnerability in media. The author suggests that the act of listening to those who have differences can make an individual, in turn, practice empathy, which allows for a more open-minded relationship with another. (2008). Open-mindedness makes one realize, then, that humans are humans no matter what path one takes—humans all are instinctually born with the desire to know and be known. In

this pursuit, one may discover that individuals with disabilities and those who are able bodied are more alike than different, and life feels more fulfilling that way.

ANALYSIS

The biggest overarching theme concerning representation in the episode is the immediate rejection of the main character because of his disability. In this context, this rejection stems from fear, and it begins with those who are in power. Because of this, other characters tend to view Dr. Shaun Murphy, the main character with autism, with an air of apprehension. In turn. This causes (almost) all of characters to question his ability to effectively save others, and hesitate to integrate him fully into the “work culture”. There is still a barrier between him and others, even when he is correct about diagnosis, the social tension looks as if it will overpower any reconciliation between Dr. Murphy and those that surround him. However, it is interesting how a single character, Dr. Aaron Glassman, sees past the risks and knows that while he will likely receive a negative response, the reward will be an unvaluable asset to the hospital. In the episode, Glassman serves as Murphy’s advocate and mentor, and Claire Browne, a supporting character, begins to take shape as Murphy’s best friend. However, over the course of the episode, Browne’s attitude towards Murphy changes from one of hesitation to one of acceptance. This only happens because Murphy calls attention to it himself. At one point, he comments, “Why is it that you were rude to me the first time that we met, nicer the second time, and now you want to be my friend? “Which time was it that you were pretending?”. This aspect of rejection stood out most because it gives viewers a glimpse into the “disabled experience” in a way that is not considered often, because the disability becomes all that the character is defined by. It was a surprising element that gave Murphy a voice, and therefore, autonomy. Autonomy is not readily given to those who are disabled in film and television, and this episode highlights that people with these

differences still have their own thoughts about circumstances, even though they are not able to express them similar to a “normal” reaction.

Additionally, the theme of being “exclusive” (only to Murphy) played out in several scenes throughout the episode. This speaks to Murphy being autistic. Autistic individuals have strong cognitive ability, but I found they are often caught up in their own “world” of thoughts while mumbling to themselves, upon researching the show in depth. These mannerisms were jarring to other characters. It was not “normal” and unpredictable, so they did not involve Murphy fully in order to avoid having to accommodate for him. In the instances where subordinate characters do ask for his opinion, they question his knowledge about such things, which is, as “exclusive” as before because they are upholding his autonomy rightly. Throughout the episode, Murphy is in the background of or dismissed from audience view. In the context of this show, this concept of “being left alone or not being asked to participate” is highlighted—it is significant to note because Murphy himself is not cognoscente of it, at least largely. He does not advocate for his ideas very aggressively (or so it seems) because, in his mind, everyone around him has his best interest at heart, even when that is not the case. In the pilot episode, his one on one interactions are more focused on his awareness of himself and how others might perceive him, but the group dynamic is a different story—Murphy hype fixates on the “end goal”. This is a trait that the supporting characters must learn how to deal with. That from my perspective, reinforces an air of kindness in the characters and the audience—just because you are uncomfortable with something does not give anyone permission to “run away” from it. For example, the show begins with Murphy attempting to save a child’s life in a busy airport. Eventually, he tries to get into the hospital that the boy goes to, claiming he knows what to do, despite being unfamiliar with the hospital community there. He instantly is told that he cannot do anything about it—the control is

not in his court. Once Murphy (after many twists) becomes one of those in the close knit community, his input is discounted, and only after several attempts is his ideology considered and is correct in his assumption of what has occurred, sparing the child's life and gaining positive attention as a reputable source for the medical community—in conjunction with his condition.

In subsequent episodes, it is Murphy's disability that makes him as incredible of a doctor as he is. This aspect, if nothing else, is most imperative. Unlike other shows that feature representation of this nature, this is framed as an overwhelmingly positive part of life to behold. That is powerful, especially as generations of all ages watch, because disability has historically been largely viewed as a negative identification marker that is met with sympathy and mourning “what could have been”. Rather, I see disability as a positive and enlightening identity marker, and this show explicitly depicts the advantages to having a disability through Murphy's character outright. Through this avenue of representation, more audiences become more aware of all sides of disability—not just the parts that make others different.

RESULTS

Historically, individuals with disabilities have not received immense recognition, awareness, and opportunities to expose others to the nuances of disability. This lack of action has been translated into a lack of attempts to showcase individuals with disabilities at all—much less in a positive manner. However, with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on the rise, an increased effort is being put forth in widespread, intentional depictions of disability on screen. This attempt certainly has been successful from an awareness standpoint in terms of increasing the exposure audiences may encounter regarding individuals with disabilities, as *The Good Doctor* is indicative of. Nevertheless, the unpredictable nature of how a disability impacts everyone

DISABILITY AND REPRESENTATION IN MEDIA: *THE GOOD DOCTOR*

differently keeps them from participating in the production process. Companies feel that it is far too costly to accommodate those who legitimately live this lifestyle out, so directors, producers, and actors are left to make their best educated guesses, and hope that their rendition is accurate “enough”. Though our society has contributed significantly to the accessibility and acceptance of minority groups in “mainstream” media, the inclusivity of individuals with disabilities still has the potential to be as pronounced as other minority groups have been in recent years. It is only then that individuals with disabilities will be uniquely “normalized” in their own right—both parties must be willing to be uncomfortable in order to understand one another.

REFERENCES

- Closing the inclusion gap for people with disabilities*. Nielsen. (2022, August 9). Retrieved October 1, 2022, from <https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2022/closing-the-inclusion-gap-for-people-with-disabilities/>
- Zhang, L., & Haller, B. (2013). Consuming image: How mass media impact the identity of people with disabilities. *Communication Quarterly*, 61(3), 319-334.
- Hartnett, A. (2000). Escaping the 'Evil Avenger' and the 'Supercrip': Images of disability in popular television.
- Whittington-Walsh, F. (2002). From freaks to savants: Disability and hegemony from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939) to *Sling Blade* (1997). *Disability & Society*, 17(6), 695-707.
- Ellis, K., & Goggin, G. (2015). Disability media participation: Opportunities, obstacles and politics. *Media International Australia*, 154(1), 78-88.
- Goggin, G. (2008). Disability, media, and the politics of vulnerability. *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, (19), 1-13.