



# Representation Matters: Race, Gender, Class, and Intersectional Representations of Autistic and Disabled Characters on Television

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**ABSTRACT** *Media reflect and affect social understandings, beliefs, and values on many topics, including the lives of autistic and disabled people. Media analysis has garnered attention in the field of disability studies, which some scholars and activists consider a promising approach to discussing the experiences of – and for promoting social justice for – autistic people, who remain underrepresented on scripted television. Additionally, existing portrayals often rely on stereotyped representations of disabled individuals as objects of pity, objects of inspiration, or villains. Television may also serve as a primary source of public knowledge about disabled people and the concept of disability. It is therefore essential that such portrayals avoid stigma and stereotyping. We take a disability studies lens to critically analyze and compare representations of diverse people, who may sometimes be conflated in the popular imaginary, across television series about autistic characters (Atypical, The Good Doctor), those with cerebral palsy (Speechless, Special), and a character with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (Shameless). We employ an intersectional analytic framework to problematize representations of autistic and disabled people, using television, feminist, and critical disability studies literatures. We analyze how the formal structure of television storytelling can either enable or disable its characters, as well as how portrayals of disability that display a sensitivity to concerns raised by critical disability discourse do not necessarily display the same sensitivity when they intersect with marginalized experiences of gender, sexuality, race, and class.*

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Media reflect and affect public beliefs, attitudes, and values. Over the last few decades, scholars across numerous disciplines have explored media content to better understand how different groups of people have been represented, including what stories are told about which people, and which stereotypes are reinforced or contested (Dahl, 1993; Hacking, 2009; Haller et al., 2012; Henry, 2013; Orchard, 2013). Scholars studying media representations of disablement have identified problematic narrative tropes and stereotypes associated with disability, including the victim, villain, hero, and fool (Barnes, 1992; Darke, 1998; Worrell, 2018). Disabled individuals (i.e., those systematically excluded from full participation in society through the social and environmental disablement of different or stigmatized bodies and minds) are not always the subjects of their own stories, but objects of pity, inspiration, and burden (Goffman, 1963; Oliver, 1990). Disabled people remain underrepresented on scripted broadcast, cable, and streaming television (GLAAD, 2020), where existing portrayals may continue to rely on problematic tropes (Worrell, 2018).

In this paper, we focus on scripted television in Anglophone North America, connecting intersecting marginalized concerns about representations of disablement, gender, sex, sexuality, race, and class using Crenshaw's (1989) conception of intersectionality as a starting point. Beyond content, we connect structure and features of scripted television (e.g., rules of a storyworld, genre norms, episodic or serialized mechanisms of storytelling) to the enablement and disablement of characters. We argue that television conventions provide a powerful opportunity for positive and inclusive representation, that intersectional approaches are neglected in television representations of disability partially because of these storytelling conventions, and that future texts can apply the strengths of television to further stories about a diversity of characters underrepresented or marginalized in ways that under realize their intersectional potential.

### **Researcher Positionality Statement and Theoretical Assumptions**

We approach this topic from various personal and interdisciplinary perspectives. John has a background in neuroscience and bioethics, studies fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) in Canadian news stories, and works with people with FASD to understand their reactions to news coverage. Kelly is an expert in FASD, specifically, with a background in developmental disabilities, human development across the lifecourse, and health service delivery. Ariel is an anthropologist who studies social and ethical issues around autism and has worked with autistic youth and adults in a variety of

research contexts. We share social science methodological approaches and we take up a critical disability studies lens, which some scholars and activists consider a promising approach to discussing the experiences of – and promoting social justice for – autistic and disabled people (Woods et al., 2018), while recognizing that the applicability of a disability perspective to autistic experiences has sometimes been contested (see e.g., participants in Chamak & Bonniau, 2013; Kenny et al., 2016; Lester et al., 2014). None of the authors identify as autistic or disabled; in this sense, we bring outsider perspectives to the issue of autistic and disabled representation. We contextualize this representation within broader discursive and cultural trends observed through engagement with various disability communities – who may or may not share similar experiences of stigmatization and barriers to social inclusion – and through our synthesis of a range of scholarly and advocacy writings. Ultimately, we aim to bring different voices into the conversation while asserting our own arguments.

This paper brings together scripted television shows about characters with diverse neuroatypical or disabling experiences,<sup>1</sup> comparing representations of autistic characters with representations of characters with cerebral palsy (CP) and a character with FASD. We bring these representations into conversation both to problematize their connection and to consider how stigma and access barriers may impact these different groups of people who are popularly understood to be related through the language of the brain. In teasing apart and reconstructing similarities and differences through the lens of critical disability studies – pointing to opportunities for solidarity and justice among groups of neuroatypical or disabled people – we also open the space to investigate boundary work in these representations (i.e., the ways these representations outline similarities, differences, and groupings of people).

Our approach to disability studies frames concerns about people in the category of “disabled” as a minority in need of legislative interventions and civil rights protections. Although the needs of different groups may not always align, the political action of the disability rights movement is one area of activism that can help advance intersectional approaches to social justice. This approach turns the critical lens back on society, ensuring that diverse groups can articulate the ways in which they are disabled, while also pointing to structural issues that can affect all marginalized people. That is to say,

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<sup>1</sup> While medical literature often groups these diverse experiences together as “neurodevelopmental disabilities,” we struggled to find an appropriate umbrella term. We have chosen to use “neuroatypical or disabling” to encompass people who do and do not identify as disabled. We chose neuroatypical to encompass people with a range of differences currently conceptualized as neurological, including both cognitive and motor differences, as others have also done (Horn et al., 2019). The concept of atypicality describes this difference, implicitly contrasting with neurotypical individuals whose cognitive and motor styles are considered common and dominant in society (Mueller, 2020). The term neuroatypical is similar to “neurodivergent,” a term closely associated with neurodiversity theory and the movement (Kapp, 2020; Milton et al., 2020), though not limited to this context (Gold, 2021).

disabled people share political experiences of marginalization and can agitate in solidarity for shared emancipatory projects.

We also wish to emphasize that given the diversity of language preferences, which vary generationally, interpersonally, regionally, and between communities, we use both person-first (i.e., “with disabilities”) and identity-first (i.e., disabled) language. While many autistic people and scholars prefer identity-first language (Robertson & Ne’eman, 2008), this is not the case for all disability communities (e.g., people with intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, FASD), wherein a lack of person-first language may perpetuate stereotyping and the marginalization of these populations (CanFASD, 2021).

Finally, while there has been some scholarly discussion of the shows we analyzed (e.g., Brady & Cardin, 2021; Cambra-Badii et al., 2021; Stern & Barnes, 2019), it has been limited. Much of the intellectual work exists outside hegemonic spaces of academic publishing, including blogs, news, and social media communities. We cite these sources, where appropriate, to provide insight into perspectives from autistic and disabled communities. While representation of autistic characters has received some attention, interrogations of representations of other neuroatypical or disabled people, particularly people with FASD or CP, remain lacking in comparison (Schormans et al., 2013; Will, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

## Representations of Autistic People

Autistic characters have been increasingly represented on screen in recent decades, with the 1988 film *Rain Man* serving as a launching point for popular culture representations in Anglophone North America (Silberman, 2015). *Rain Man* drew on the trope of the autistic savant, an autistic person with extraordinary skills in a specific, limited area, often corresponding with significant difficulties in other areas of life. Reliance on the savant trope carries the same risks as similar “supercrip” narratives, valuing autistic people only for their savant abilities – which most autistic people do not have – which devalues autistic life overall (Loftis, 2014).

Since *Rain Man*, several television shows have prominently featured characters coded or identified as autistic. In the early 2000s, many of these representations were coded and largely conformed to the autistic savant trope, reflected through an understanding of autism as Asperger’s syndrome and Asperger’s syndrome as savantism (e.g., Jerry Espenson on *Boston Legal*, Sheldon Cooper on *The Big Bang Theory*, Abed Nadir on *Community*, Zack

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<sup>2</sup> Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder or FASD is a diagnosis given when an individual with cognitive, physical, and behavioural difficulties is known to have been exposed to alcohol prenatally (Cook et al., 2016). Cerebral palsy or CP refers to a heterogeneous set of motor difficulties (Blair & Cans, 2018).

Addy and Temperance Brennan on *Bones*). Most of these characters were portrayed as highly logical, successful, and socially inept, with atypical and quirky behaviours played for laughs. They also often embodied a particular white masculinity that Matthews (2019) calls “autistic techno-savant[ism]” (p. 58). Later, in the 2010s, shows emerged that told more serious stories about explicitly autistic people, like Max Braverman on *Parenthood* (Holton, 2013). In these cases, a character’s autistic identity was often legitimized through a diagnosis. However, *Parenthood* was not primarily about autistic characters or even autism communities.<sup>3</sup>

Notably, both popular and professional representations often associate autism with whiteness, high socioeconomic status, and masculinity (Jack, 2014; Matthews, 2019). Autistic scholars, artists, and self-advocates have called for greater diversity in the portrayal of autistic experiences, including the perspectives of autistic people of colour, women, and non-binary folk (Brown et al., 2017). Such portrayals are seen occasionally in representations of autistic boys of colour (e.g., Connor on *Degrassi: The Next Generation*), white autistic girls (e.g., Isadora Smackel on *Girl Meets World*) and women (e.g., Dr. Dixon on *Grey’s Anatomy*), and occasionally autistic women of colour (e.g., Amber on *Atypical*).

### **Disability Media Representation and Intersectionality: Tropes, Stereotypes, and Narratives on Television**

Several distinctive features of scripted television lend themselves to certain kinds of stories. More than most artforms, television (TV) is constrained by market and industry forces, such as actor contracts and ratings (Mittell, 2015). TV has historically needed to appeal to broad audiences, which has likely contributed to a lack of diversity favouring protagonists in “unmarked” categories: white, straight, able-bodied, and male. However, recent shifts toward digital streaming platforms and the increased fragmentation of the TV landscape – sometimes described as “Peak TV” (Gray & Lotz, 2019) – have also contributed to an increase in shows by diverse showrunners on diverse topics and identities. Notably, TV storytelling takes place over long periods of time, allowing viewers to build possibly meaningful parasocial relationships with characters that do and do not represent them, and to engage with and consume metatext and paratexts that influence understandings of

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<sup>3</sup> We use the term “autism communities” here and in similar ways throughout this paper to distinguish representations that centre the views of certain parents and professionals rather than the views of autistic self-advocates. As explained by Orsini (2009, p. 115), “autism advocacy” represents those “more interested in pressing for policy change around the treatment for autism and concern with its causes” while a term like “autistic advocates” reflects “the efforts of activists to create a positive identity for autistic people using, albeit not exclusively, a disability rights frame... members of the autistic or autistic rights movement decry the focus on and language of ‘curing’ autistics.”

authorial intent and real-world constraints on storytelling choices. TV is also structured by extrinsic genre norms and storyworld-intrinsic narrative rules (Mittell, 2015).

Beyond questions of representation, the unique structure of TV also directly enables and disables characters. For example, extrinsic genre conventions of the episodic 21-minute American situational comedy (sitcom) often cause a return to status quo at the end of an episode (Austerlitz, 2014), which can lead storytellers to take shortcuts around what might otherwise be a serious barrier to a disabled character; a barrier in one episode (e.g., difficulty socializing, lack of funds for specialized equipment) might be ignored entirely in another. At the same time, while these choices of convenience can provide examples of unrealistically accessible worlds, they can also help us imagine a world without (or with fewer) barriers.

### **Current Study**

In this paper, we aim to combine work from television studies and disability studies, but it is also important to note emerging work in an area of research called “media disability studies,” which aims to address the complexities of media and disability together (Elcessor et al., 2017). While our insights are primarily focused on those from critical disability studies and related analyses about the representation of disability in media, we also aim to reflect concerns from television (and media studies) broadly, including the economic forces at play in media production (e.g., the choice of whether to hire disabled or neuroatypical actors; Brady & Cardin, 2021) and audience engagement and reception. Specifically, we address representations of disability in shows featuring autistic characters, characters with CP, and a character with FASD. We have selected these three specific experiences to highlight the dominance of autism representation, the boundary work and limited engagement with intellectual disability in representations of autism and CP, the common erasure of non-white experiences despite racialized differences in diagnosis and access to services, and the ambiguous and inconsistent role money and socioeconomic status can play in these stories.

### **Methods**

Informed by intersectionality as a guiding framework (Crenshaw, 1989; Hankivsky et al., 2014), we critically explored representations of characters on five American television shows (see Table 1): *Atypical* (Rashid et al., 2017-present; autism), *The Good Doctor* (Shore et al., 2017-present; autism), *Special* (Dokoza et al., 2019-present; CP), *Speechless* (Gernon et al., 2016-2019; CP), and *Shameless U.S.* (Wells et al., 2011-present; FASD). We focused on gender, sex, sexuality, race, and class, how characters’

experiences of these social categories intersected with their experiences of disability, and how the metatext of the show furthered (or failed to further) nuanced representation. These shows were chosen by the researchers as recent examples that included a neuroatypical or disabled series regular character, with neuroatypicality and disability as structuring features of the storytelling and characterization. *Shameless U.S.* was chosen as it is, to our knowledge, the *only* show featuring a series regular character with FASD, despite the character and diagnosis being peripheral.

We employed two key approaches to data collection and analysis: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and critical friend discussions. We chose CDA (Fairclough, 1989; Titscher et al., 2000) as an interdisciplinary method, given our diverse backgrounds and shared attention to power dynamics, as well as the relationship between society, culture, and television discourse. Our analysis attended to how intersecting social experiences were represented in a commonly consumed medium (i.e., popular broadcast, cable, and streaming television programming), reflective of the assumption that (like cultural studies) “society and culture are shaped by discourse, and... constitute discourse” (Titscher et al., 2000, p. 146). As CDA assumes that texts cannot be divorced from social and cultural contexts, we centrally employ intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) as a theoretical framework elaborating on how experiences of disability cannot be separated from experiences of sex, gender, sexuality, race, and class, while referring to TV production and reception practices. As Hankivsky et al. (2014) note, a central tenet of intersectionality is that human lives cannot be reduced to single characteristics (i.e., disability status). While our understandings and interpretations of intersectionality are informed by our readings of the shows’ constructions of disability and the characters’ social locations, it is important to bear in mind our readings of the show as scholars (and how those may differ from other audiences), our lived experiences and social locations, and how audiences make sense of, and engage with, the media they consume.

We watched shows independently and together. Independent viewing involved note-taking with an emphasis on identifying common themes, disability media stereotypes, and understanding the representation of disability intersecting with other categories of social experience. We met virtually to discuss episodes viewed alone or in pairs, our evolving understanding of each show, and to watch specific episodes together. In doing so, we engaged in collaborative data analysis. All levels of analysis were done by all authors.

During these meetings, we engaged in critical friend discussions (Smith & McGannon, 2018) to challenge each other’s observations and interpretations of a show’s content, meanings, and narratives. These conversations ensured that we were able to explore and construct multiple interpretations of the data, with consideration for each researcher’s experiences and areas of expertise. These meetings enabled us to both watch and analyze individual episodes of a show, while also placing that episode within the broader context

of a show itself, the other shows watched, and social trends tied to media narratives and intersectional representations. These reflexive discussions were thus used to refine our analysis to ensure it fit well with our theoretical positioning and larger research aims.

## Results and Discussion

In this paper, we combine our results and discussion in one section divided into two parts: (1) a description of each show and its core concerns; and (2) a comparison across these shows and their structures, employing an intersectional analytic framework that connects disablement to gender, sex, sexuality, race, and class. Notably, extrinsic genre norms associated with certain kinds of shows (e.g., dramas, comedies) are constantly evolving. While the broadcast shows we analyzed can more clearly be described as traditional dramas or sitcoms, the shows on cable or streaming platforms belong to newly emerging structures (i.e., shows marketed or classified as comedies that nonetheless reflect dramatic topics and storytelling choices). Here, we refer to such shows as “comedies.”

Show	Disability	Genre	Character	Diagnosis	Status	Air Dates
Atypical	Autism	30-minute streaming “comedy”	Sam Gardner	Explicit	Series Regular / Protagonist	2017 to Present; 3 seasons
The Good Doctor	Autism	42-minute broadcast drama	Shaun Murphy	Explicit	Series Regular / Protagonist	2017 to Present; 4 seasons
Speechless	Cerebral Palsy	21-minute broadcast sitcom	JJ DiMeo	Explicit	Series Regular / Protagonist	2016 to 2019; 3 seasons
Special	Cerebral Palsy	15-minute streaming “comedy”	Ryan Hayes	Explicit	Series Regular / Protagonist	2019 to Present; 1 season
Shameless (U.S.)	FASD	60-minute cable “comedy”	Carl Gallagher	Coded / Retrospective	Series Regular / Peripheral	2011-Present; 11 seasons

*Table 1.* Description of Television Shows Analyzed.

## Autism

### *Atypical*

The coming-of-age Netflix “comedy” *Atypical* (Rashid et al., 2017-present) was initially advertised around main character, autistic 18-year-old Sam, questing for sex and (secondarily) romance. Sam attends a mainstream high school and later college, sees a therapist and eventually works with a peer group and college disability services office, works in an electronics store, and has a passion for penguins. The series heavily features Sam’s mother (Elsa), father (Doug), sister (Casey), best friend (Zahid), and girlfriend (Paige). The lead actor, Keir Gilchrist, is not autistic, and the original team did not seem to include autistic consultants; both moves were criticized in the reception of season one, especially by autistic reviewers (e.g., Luteran, 2018). Season two addressed these criticisms by hiring autistic consultants and casting autistic actors for Sam’s peer group, only a few of whom get much development.

*Atypical* focuses primarily on the heterosexual romance plot of a straight, white, academically-achieving artistic young man, and on the family drama surrounding his coming of age. It focuses heavily on Sam’s parents’ relationship(s) and how Sam’s parents reflect on Sam and autism. Much attention is given to autism mom tropes that are beyond the scope of this paper (see Jack, 2014). Disability justice issues sometimes appear against this backdrop: Paige convinces the school to hold a “Silent Dance” (Season 1, Episode 8, “The Silencing Properties of Snow”) to help Sam avoid sensory overload; Doug becomes involved in first-responder training after an officer misreads Sam’s behaviour as criminally suspicious and arrests him. While both plots feature advocacy on behalf of Sam (whether he wants it or not), season three implicitly critiques this advocacy when Sam misses his appointment with college disability services. Elsa attempts to navigate the services for him but finds that the office will only talk to students directly. When Sam later engages with disability services, it is his own choice.

It is difficult to say that *Atypical* comes from an autistic point of view. Sam is the main character and narratively bookends most episodes. Sound and camera angles do often create an insider view to Sam’s experiences of sensory overload. However, while the humour sometimes reflects Sam’s sense of humour, jokes also seem to be at his expense. Sam is not always given a say in key events in his own life, especially early in the series.

### *The Good Doctor*

*The Good Doctor* (Shore et al., 2017-present), an American medical drama, focuses on Shaun Murphy, a surgical resident recruited to work in a major metropolitan hospital. Shaun – played by Freddie Highmore, who is not

autistic (Finn, 2020) – is both autistic and a savant. The show navigates his capacity to be a “good doctor” despite the challenges he faces (e.g., difficulty communicating). The show has received both praise and criticism from autistic audiences, as well as researchers. Sometimes heralded for its accuracy in depicting an autistic man (Baños et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2017) and perceived positive representation (Moore, 2019), criticisms of the show include its “alleged commodification of people with autism” (Stark, 2020, p. 2), with Shaun’s character being an easy to accept and consume market-friendly portrayal of an autistic person (Duan et al., 2018; Skudra, 2018).

The central drama of *The Good Doctor*, beyond weekly medical cases, reflects tension between Shaun’s surgical competence and his perceived poor coping mechanisms, social skills, decision-making, and bedside manner. Given the interplay between autistic representation and representations of savantism, Shaun often outshines his colleagues. However, despite his strengths, his excellence is often positioned in contrast to perceived deficits, including difficulty grasping the intricacies of doctor-patient relationships and hospital politics (Baños et al., 2018).

Like Sam in *Atypical*, Shaun is a straight white male protagonist. Unlike Sam, Shaun conforms more to the savant trope in terms of difficulties and exceptionalities. His surgical skills and medical knowledge are foregrounded and externalized as imagined three-dimensional anatomical imagery, demonstrating Shaun’s neuroatypicality and his application of that neuroatypicality to accomplish amazing feats. However, this element of the show has been criticized for reinforcing the notion that autistic people are always savants with a special skill or talent (Baños et al., 2018; Draaisma, 2009; Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2018).

*The Good Doctor* explores many sources of discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes, including how hospital managers may find it difficult to accept that an autistic person can be a good professional (Baños et al., 2018) and can succeed with ongoing positive support from mentors and friends. In season one, Shaun often faces disrespect from patients, their families, and colleagues. These attitudes are critiqued when Hunter, a man with quadriplegia, argues in Season 1, Episode 16 (“Pain”) that “other doctor[s] started with a basic level of respect. It’s implied: They’re competent.”

## Cerebral Palsy

### *Speechless*

*Speechless* (Gernon et al., 2016-2019),<sup>4</sup> an American sitcom, starred Micah Fowler (an actor with CP) as Jimmy “JJ” DiMeo Jr., the eldest of three

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<sup>4</sup> Some of our discussion about *Speechless* is derived from earlier work (see Aspler & Cascio, 2018).

children in a nuclear working-class family. The cast also includes his mother (Maya), father (Jimmy), brother (Ray), sister (Dylan), and speech aide (Kenneth). Although JJ is ostensibly the protagonist, in its first season, JJ's younger brother Ray served as an occasional audience surrogate, watching and supporting JJ.

*Speechless* effectively addresses complex topics associated with disability across its entire run, ranging from an episode about “inspiration porn” (Young, 2012) to reflections on ableist slurs, financial planning and support needs, disability and sexual activity, and accessible spaces. Given its episodic format, many such topics are addressed within the confines of a single episode, which is how *Speechless* can sometimes avoid addressing those same topics in every situation. For example, in Season 1, Episode 15 (“T-H--THE C-L--CLUB”), an unrealistically effective electronic communication board serves as a launching point for JJ to consider dismissing Kenneth as his speech aide – something the audience knows would be unlikely given typical TV acting contracts. This board exists to create and resolve narrative tension between JJ and Kenneth. When JJ reveals that he feels like a burden, and Kenneth assures JJ that he is not, the board disappears from the world of the show forever, despite being such a useful tool. In reality, the board might be a financially inaccessible piece of equipment, or else could compliment JJ's use of an aide rather than be seen as supplanting him.

### *Special*

*Special* (Dokoza et al., 2019-present) is a semi-autobiographical show written, produced by, and starring Ryan O'Connell, a young gay white man with self-described “mild” CP, as a heightened version of himself seeking independence. Ryan is about to start a new job as an unpaid intern at a feminist magazine (Eggwoke) when he is hit by a car. He then uses this experience to explain his mobility challenges, rather than tell others about his CP. Even before the accident, Ryan feared telling people he is “gay *and* disabled.”<sup>5</sup> Ryan also has a codependent relationship with his mother, Karen, echoing some of the tropes explored in *Atypical* and embraced comedically by *Speechless*. Rounding out the cast are Ryan's only friend and ally at work (Kim, a plus-sized Indian-American woman and the most successful writer at Eggwoke), Ryan's offensive boss (Olivia, who runs Eggwoke to exploit feminist discourse for profit), Ryan's love interest (Carey), and his mother's love interest (Phil). Overall, *Special* explores the intersection of queer

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<sup>5</sup> In some ways, *Special* seems to embrace a common misperception that frames intersectionality as additive, rather than constitutive (Yuval-Davis, 2006); as in, difficult experiences of being gay and disabled are added together, rather than seen as inextricable or constitutive of ableist homophobia or homophobic ableism.

identity and disability, internalized ableism, codependence, and falling through the cracks with a mild disability.

### **Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder**

#### *Shameless U.S.*

Adapted from the British series of the same name, *Shameless U.S.* (Wells et al., 2011-present) is a “comedy” on Showtime. *Shameless* centres around the Gallaghers, portrayed as poor, working class, and dysfunctional. Frank Gallagher, a single father of six (Fiona, Phillip, Ian, Debbie, Carl, and Liam), often spends his time drunk or scheming for money to get drunk. The show explores the diverse and often unhealthy relationships among the Gallaghers via their interactions with Frank as family patriarch and Fiona as a stand-in parent. Over its extended run, the show has explored many complex intersecting social determinants of health, including substance use, mental illness, poverty, crime, and adverse childhood experiences.

*Shameless* establishes early that each of the Gallagher children were conceived while their parents were under the influence of several substances, including alcohol, cocaine, ecstasy, and acid. Fans of the show have long speculated that the Gallagher children could potentially all have developmental challenges because of these diverse prenatal substance exposures (SecrecyKilled, 2017). In *Shameless*’ seventh season, one of the youngest Gallagher children, Carl, is indicated (perhaps jokingly) to have FASD. In an argument between Carl and Frank in Season 7, Episode 6 (“The Defenestration of Frank”), Frank sarcastically congratulates Carl for putting “...three words together! I told the doctors that fetal alcohol syndrome wouldn’t wreck your brain.”

As the only known example of a series regular with FASD on TV, it is clear that FASD is the least commonly represented of the experiences considered in this paper. While Carl’s disability is never explicitly addressed on *Shameless*, this one-off line allows the audience to read (and reread) the story of Carl as being about a person with FASD. When the narrative does focus on him, his stories are mostly about a troubled, impulsive, and violent child who does not comprehend the consequences of his actions and who performs poorly in school. His early behaviours include sociopathic tendencies framed as humorous representations of Carl’s “dark future” and “budding psychosis” (Season 1, Episode 6, “Killer Carl”), including burning toys, abusing animals, and assembling an electric chair for a Barbie doll. In later seasons, Carl’s behaviours escalate to further violence, selling drugs, and eventually being sentenced to juvenile detention.

Interestingly, the show does not always frame these behaviours as a problem. Given its dark comedic tone, Carl’s apparent sociopathy sometimes enables him to be the hero, such as in Season 1, Episode 5 (“Three Boys”)

when he violently defeats bullies with a baseball bat or knocks out a predatory priest. However, while FASD stakeholders were happy about the introduction of a character with FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Ottawa, 2016), the show's reliance on Carl's destructive behaviours plays into common stereotypes of adults, particularly men, with FASD as violent, dangerous, and irredeemable villains or criminals (Aspler et al., 2018). Behaviours like hyperactivity or difficulties with emotional regulation and attention, as well as the assumption that individuals with FASD will have a poor life trajectory, can contribute to ongoing negative attitudes, perceptions, and stigma toward individuals with FASD (Bell et al., 2016). Therefore, while the inclusion of a character with FASD on TV is an important step forward, reliance on these stereotyped representations remains significantly problematic.

### Structure of the Television Shows Analyzed

Each show has a very different storytelling structure and style. Both *Speechless* and *The Good Doctor* have more traditional episodic formats, with *The Good Doctor* featuring standalone medical cases of the week that thematically connect to the doctors' personal lives, and *Speechless* resetting to the status quo at the start of most episodes. These shows reflect the expected extrinsic norms of traditional broadcast dramas and sitcoms, even as they develop their own intrinsic storytelling norms. In contrast, *Atypical*, *Shameless*, and *Special* represent different versions of serialized "comedy" blending dramatic and comedic storytelling norms, on streaming platforms or cable networks, with stories that often continue seamlessly across episodes in contrast to more self-contained episodic cases or situations. *Atypical* was produced for a streaming platform (Netflix), so its structure is not defined by advertisement breaks, has a fairly linear storytelling style, and all episodes in a season appear online simultaneously. *Shameless* is a 60-minute semi-satirical "comedy" airing weekly on cable, where the characters swear excessively and the show explores more mature themes. *Special* has the most unique structure (like *Atypical*, produced for Netflix), acting more as a series of vignettes given its short 15-minute runtime, almost entirely focused on – and told from – Ryan's point of view.

### Intersectional Analysis of Television Shows about Autistic and Disabled Characters

Discussions of autism, social justice, and media are incomplete without an intersectional analysis of the ways different identities are represented. A commitment to social justice is key both to intersectional approaches (Crenshaw, 1989; Hankivsky et al., 2014) and the neurodiversity paradigm

used in the autistic rights movement (Strand, 2017). Intersectional framing includes an understanding of who benefits and who is excluded from the stories we choose to tell, and the upholding of long-standing assumptions or stereotypes about their social locations and challenges (e.g., the autistic savant narrative of *The Good Doctor*). Despite the relevance of intersectional approaches within social justice movements, the shows analyzed in this paper display notable silences. Media portrayals of disability commonly rely on stereotypes that frame people as pitiable, exceptional, burdensome, or villainous (Barnes, 1992; Darke, 1998; Worrell, 2018). While each show conforms to some of these stereotypes sometimes, some also centre disablement and disabled characters in ways that challenge stereotypes and inject nuance into disability representation. However, even as portrayals of disability have grown in complexity, those same portrayals often fail to contend with intersecting experiences. Specifically, these shows emphasize intersections of disability with whiteness and masculinity, without attending to the particularity of these experiences – potentially inappropriately universalizing them. While human lives cannot be reduced to single characteristics (Hankivsky et al., 2014), most shows included here emphasize a characters' neuroatypicality or disability as their central or defining characteristic.

All five shows feature white male protagonists, mostly framed as straight, high achieving, and relatively financially well off. Their identities inform their experiences in relation to neuroatypicality or disablement, but a presumption of whiteness and maleness enables these shows to remain silent on issues tied to race, sex, and gender. It is their atypicality that is marked and reflected explicitly in storytelling, despite the kinds of stories actually told being inextricably linked to, and constitutive of, their gender, sex, and race. Although we do not aim to imply an additive approach to anti-oppression work or representation (Yuval-Davis, 2006), some of what is reflected in the media we analyzed implicitly embraces an additive model.

#### *Disability, Sex, Gender, and Sexuality*

Both *Atypical* and *The Good Doctor* centre young, white, academically successful, heterosexual men, reinforcing stereotyped imagery of an autistic person as white and male (Matthews, 2019), while challenging stereotypical images of autistic people as non-sexual and uninterested in relationships (Bennett et al., 2019). Although *The Good Doctor* plays into the savant trope, *Atypical* resists this trope by showing Sam facing academic and artistic challenges. These challenges, especially in season three, parallel those of his non-autistic friends and family. Both shows balance the protagonists' strengths with a heavy reliance on burden tropes that instead centre the voices of family, employers, and friends.

Similarly, both *Speechless* and *Special* initially focus on sexuality and disability, an important topic given that disabled people broadly are sometimes viewed as non-sexual. Notably, *Special* features a gay protagonist, which provides another lens on the same topic. In both shows, the burden trope is somewhat challenged by the protagonists seeking independence, especially from their overbearing mothers, a theme shared by *Atypical*. While these shows emphasize overbearing mother stereotypes, *Shameless* explores the contrasting selfish mother stereotype for individuals with FASD (Aspler et al., 2018). Monica, a largely absent mother who struggles with her own ongoing substance use and mental illness, is often vilified by her children, which reinforces misconceptions that women who use substances during pregnancy just do not love their children enough and that there is a certain type of woman who uses substances during pregnancy.

*Shameless* contrasts with the other representations of neuroatypical or disabled protagonists we analyzed in important ways. For example, most of Carl's story focuses on violence and criminality in poor socioeconomic circumstances. While autism is generally associated with whiteness and high socioeconomic status (Jack, 2014; Matthews, 2019), FASD is often constructed as a diagnosis for the marginalized (Flannigan et al., 2018) with emphasis on the prevalence of FASD among special populations, including children in care, justice-involved individuals, and Indigenous communities.

These shows raise questions about the inclusivity of their production practices and their audiences. These shows do not all include people with disabilities as stars, consultants, writers, directors, or producers. Whether a show centres either the voices of autistic and disabled people or the voices of their families can imply that, while a show may be *about* autism or disability, it might not be intended or understood as primarily *for* autistic or disabled people. This concern additionally permeates their handling of intersectionality both within disability communities and society in general.

The concept of disability reflects an extraordinary breadth of experience. Both *Special* and *Speechless* tackle these differences by raising questions about pan-disability solidarity, stigma, boundary work, and privilege. In both cases, categories of disability are carved up and set above and below each other – at times on purpose, directly exploring and critiquing boundaries, and at others, uncritically and implicitly endorsing those boundaries. For example, Ryan tells his physiotherapist in Season 1, Episode 1 (“Cerebral LOLzy”): “I’m so fucking jealous of Bob... It must be freeing to be so disabled... I’m not able-bodied enough to be hanging in the mainstream world, but I’m not disabled enough to be hanging around with the cool [physiotherapy] crowd.” This discussion, while framed as dark humour, ties Ryan’s genuine and complex concerns about different experiences of disability to his self-loathing, internalized ableism, and decision to pretend he was hit by a car. His physiotherapist pushes back by arguing that Ryan is “lucky” and “privileged” and that his comment was “offensive.” In contrast, after a blind date with Michael, a d/Deaf man, Ryan reflects that he “can still

do better than a deaf guy” (Season 1, Episode 7, “Blind Deaf Date”). Although Ryan is critiqued and learns from this experience, Michael never returns. He exists solely as a punchline and so Ryan can reflect on his internalized ableism.

Similarly, *Speechless* creates a boundary between physical and intellectual disabilities when JJ’s mother explains to a rude stranger in the pilot that “he’s all there upstairs,” a comment that shifts stigma away from one kind of disabled person onto another. *Speechless* later returns to this topic with nuance when one of Ray’s crushes uses the “r-word” in Season 1, Episode 21 (“P-R--PROM”). Ray concludes,

It’s not about JJ and [the r-word] not being an accurate description of him. What about people who do think a different way or at a different pace? Should we reference them in a nasty way when we do something dumb because we think it’s cute?

Although “dumb” is also an ableist slur, *Speechless* aims to demonstrate solidarity between different experiences of neuroatypicality and disability. Boundary work is not explored in either autism-focused show, but the focus on high-achieving protagonists supports similar boundaries, with *The Good Doctor* endorsing the savant trope, and both *The Good Doctor* and *Atypical* representing experiences of autism without intellectual disability. This trend in representation implicitly reinforces misconceptions that social justice movements such as the neurodiversity movement do not include people with intellectual disabilities, whereas in practice, neurodiversity advocates repeatedly challenge such misconceptions (Vivian et al., n.d.). Moreover, neurodiversity advocates have long asserted the relevance of neurodiversity not just as an autistic activism movement, but a broader disability rights movement inclusive of all people (Vivian et al., n.d.). Discussion of boundary work and possibilities for pan-disability solidarity in some shows introduce the possibility for engagement with these ideas, a possibility currently under-explored in television featuring autistic characters.

Each show engages with sex, gender, and sexuality through the lens of male protagonists. At times, they lean toward toxic masculinity; JJ and Sam were both initially portrayed as sex-driven teens. This portrayal may serve to normalize JJ and Sam as just like other teenage boys. However, the shows demonstrate their interest through scenes of boundary-violating behaviours, such as when JJ becomes the cheerleaders’ manager (a non-existent position), secretly using his laser pointer to indicate his interest in parts of their bodies, or when Sam breaks into his therapist’s house to leave her a romantic gift. These portrayals contend with an assumption that paradoxically co-exists with the idea of disabled people as non-sexual (i.e., that neuroatypical people are inherently sexually inappropriate or dangerous). *Shameless* may also reinforce this trope. Carl is portrayed as over-sexed, frequently masturbating, and obsessed with women’s body parts, although this is not explicitly

described as disability-related and may instead reflect adolescent development coupled with adverse childhood experiences and a lack of parental supervision. In contrast, *The Good Doctor* challenges these assumptions by demonstrating Shaun's caring and supportive attitude toward his partner, and her respect for his challenges, as they become more intimate.

*Speechless* and *Atypical* also challenge these assumptions. Despite early examples of inappropriate overtures, both Sam and JJ are later shown to be good, caring, and safe partners. In Season 3, Episode 21 ("THE S-T-A--STAIRCASE"), when JJ meets his girlfriend Izzy's parents, they assume he could never have or act on sexual desires. After JJ and Izzy conspire to prove them wrong by getting caught in bed, her father arrives home and angrily yells at them while helping JJ down the stairs. Though *Speechless* leans on problematic gendered (and racialized) tropes in the angry, overprotective Latino father, it also problematizes common assumptions about people with disabilities as unthreatening, cute, or non-sexual (Medina-Rico et al., 2017). Similarly, in *Atypical*, Sam's character arc later rests heavily on developing a mutually caring relationship with his girlfriend Paige.

*Special* also focuses heavily on sexuality and romance, with the notable distinction that the protagonist is gay. While JJ and Sam are awkward teenagers excited and scared to find love and have sex for the first time, Ryan is in his 20s and sexually inexperienced, which distresses him. In Season 1, Episode 2 ("The Deep End"), when Ryan attempts to engage in intimacy, his inexperience and discomfort become clear. His would-be partner ends their alone time, leaving Ryan feeling hurt. The show is ambiguous as to whether Ryan is hurt because he thinks that his inexperience or his (undisclosed) CP was at the root of the rejection. Certainly, Ryan thinks that his inexperience is at least in part tied to his disability. Ultimately, Ryan loses his virginity to a sex worker. The framing of the experience is extremely supportive of sex work and the act enables Ryan, going forward, to have more confidence in himself.

While the shows about CP and autism challenge various sex-negative stereotypes about disabled people, they also sometimes reinforce negative attitudes and stereotypes about women. In *Speechless*, JJ's brother Ray's poor behaviour toward women receives encouragement from their father, who suggests he should hide how much scheming is involved in his interactions with girls, rather than change his attitude. Sam receives similar encouragement from his father. The metatext seems, initially, oblivious to how Ray's possessive and entitled attitude toward women conforms to the nice guy trope – that some men (perhaps via geek masculinity) understand relationships as an exchange in which they pay the currency of niceness (through words, acts, and gifts) to win the goods of a kiss, a relationship, or a hookup (Salter & Blodgett, 2017). However, the writing does evolve as Ray's worst qualities become heightened, and he shifts from audience surrogate to mockable know-it-all in season two. Later, in the series finale (Season 3, Episode 22, "U-N-R--UNREALISTIC"), *Speechless* explicitly interrogates

Ray's sexism. As the only boy on a school trip, he assumes he can choose any girl he wants, but after several rejections, he asks: "Am I really that bad?" He then conducts an elaborate focus group with the girls in his grade that serves as a metatextual reflection on the reasons why Ray is so unlikeable. In *Atypical*, Doug only changes his advice when he realizes the object of Sam's affection is his therapist.

While *Speechless* rarely challenges Ray's attitude toward women, it does feature complex female characters in Maya and Dylan. *Atypical*, on the other hand, frequently portrays women as disruptive, dangerous, and corrupting forces. Paige's stress often acts as comic relief, with little exploration of the idea that Paige's reactions could be indicative of neuroatypicality and, regardless, should be worthy of empathy and support. Similarly, women's sexuality is framed as especially dangerous: Elsa cheats and disrupts the family; Zahid's relationship leads him to break off his friendship with Sam; and in Season 3, Episode 1 ("Best Laid Plans"), Sam misses a deadline and blames Paige for "distract[ing him] with the promise of sex." While there is some narrative pushback, sexuality – especially women's sexuality – is nevertheless often portrayed as a corrupting influence.

*Atypical* also often reproduces essentialist understandings of gender roles, including overbearing mothers and uninvolved fathers among other hidden conservative tropes (see Romero, 2017). However, Sam's tomboy-coded sister, Casey, is one exception to these framings. When Casey develops feelings for a female friend in the third season, Sam models acceptance by reassuring her that it would not be "a problem" (in Casey's words) if she dated a girl (Season 3, Episode 9, "Sam Takes a Walk"). While Casey's sexuality does lead to a breakup with her boyfriend, it is not treated as threatening in the same way as Paige, Elsa, Zahid's toxic girlfriend, or even Sam's sexuality. Moreover, Sam's explicit support of Casey seems to suggest a link between Sam's autistic perspective and queer acceptance.

### *Disability, Race, and Class*

These shows also engage with race through the lens of white protagonists. *Atypical* features strong supporting characters of colour, including best friend Zahid and members of Sam's peer group like Jasper and Amber; however, the show has also been criticized for portraying many characters of colour as villains (Romero, 2017). Similarly, while almost all of Shaun's colleagues or superiors on *The Good Doctor* are people of colour, few initially believe in him save for his white father figure and mentor. These shows nonetheless remain largely silent on race, especially compared to shows like *Speechless* and *Special*, despite clear opportunities to reflect on racialized experiences of disability. The clearest example of this silence in *Atypical* surfaces in Season 2, Episode 6 ("In The Dragon's Lair") when Sam faces police harassment while overwhelmed. Sam provides a white face for this issue, but in doing so,

allows the show to be silent about police mistreatment of autistic people of colour. Since Sam is white, the narrative can choose to ignore the possibility of police brutality; an officer (himself a person of colour) interprets Sam's atypical behaviour as "tweaking" and only escalates the situation when Sam's friend Zahid (also a person of colour) "charge[s]" in to help. The officer never frames Sam as a danger to be beaten or killed, but as simply atypical enough to be arrested. The resolution to the situation is even more telling; Doug and Zahid frame the officer's actions as a problem to correct, not an expected outcome or daily occurrence to manage. This silence is especially notable considering intersectional approaches to police violence in autistic self-advocacy spaces such as the U.S. Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (Strand, 2017).

*Speechless* most explicitly engages with race through JJ's speech aide, Kenneth. JJ replaces his first aide, a white woman who refuses to voice JJ's colourful word choices, with Kenneth after hearing his "cooler" and, for JJ, more authentic voice. Black masculinity is often configured as cool, which *Speechless* both explores with nuance and casually exploits. *Speechless* also directly explores the overlap between the marginalization experienced by JJ and Kenneth, for example in Season 1, Episode 12 ("H-E-R---HERO"), when Kenneth points out the similarity between inspiration porn and the "Magical Negro" trope, "where the Black character is just there to help the white guy on his journey and he mainly speaks in folksy sayings" (in Kenneth's words; see also Hughey, 2009).

On *Shameless*, race is portrayed with complexity across the show's long run. However, in relation to Carl, race is explored through his appropriation of Black culture as he begins to perform negative stereotypes associated with male Blackness, particularly his language use, clothing style, and friend choices, as he joins a gang and starts selling drugs. While Kenneth's Blackness is configured as cool on *Speechless*, Black masculinity on *Shameless* is portrayed as toxic and aligns with the worst stereotypes about Black men and communities of colour, especially in light of the show's emphasis on poverty and the experiences of working-class individuals (adopted from its predecessor's narrative of the "underclass" after Thatcherism in the United Kingdom; Nunn & Biressi, 2010).

*Special* more implicitly explores these issues. In Season 1, Episode 4 ("Housechilling Party"), Ryan's co-worker Kim describes her experience of being marginalized as "a non-skinny, non-white girl" who has to "work overtime. It's like 'Hey, I'm a voluptuous brown girl, but I'm wearing a \$448 dress and I got a blowout, so I'm safe! Accept me!' It's exhausting. And expensive. I'm in so much debt." In this way, Kim reflects on how her marginalization at the intersection of race and class are inextricable. *Special* explores this intersection further by criticizing the exploitation of marginalization at Eggwoke, where Kim's pieces about her lived experiences drive a huge amount of Eggwoke's traffic and reader consumption.

Economic exploitation of marginalized identities is not the only important way class figures into these narratives. In many instances class is often only discussed when necessary for plot or character motivation; financial concerns are otherwise ignored. On *Speechless*, the DiMeos argue with insurance companies, their bathroom has no door, and their roof is covered by a tarp. However, the family does not appear concerned by certain other expenses. Like in the previously discussed electronic communication board example, we can understand these inconsistencies within the structure of a sitcom, which removes barriers or presents challenges when narratively convenient (Mittell, 2004). Ray especially struggles with pressure to be or appear wealthy. While often framed as a joke, Ray's desires are nuanced when he explains that it has all been "for JJ" (Season 1, Episode 19, "C-H—CHEATER!").

While class issues feature centrally in *Speechless* and *Shameless*, class figures ambiguously in *Special* and *Atypical*. Certainly, Kim's concerns about appearing respectable reflect racialized class concerns. However, it is unclear how well Ryan relates to Kim's dilemma. Ryan is attempting to establish himself professionally in an unpaid internship and a new apartment. While Ryan's mother criticizes the unpaid nature of the internship, he works more for respect than out of financial necessity, as he has the support of his (single) mother and the money his mom won in suing the hospital that Ryan calls his "CP money" (Season 1, Episode 3, "Free Scones"). This description might allude to an unexplored aspect of Ryan's struggle with identity and self-loathing, by constructing CP as primarily an injury to be compensated for.

*Atypical* also presents a picture of a middle-class white family living in the suburbs, although Sam's family does face financial limitations. Casey is admitted to private school on an athletic scholarship and frequently feels out of place and judged. However, like in *Speechless*, other massive expenses pass without comment, like Sam buying a canoe. On *The Good Doctor*, Shaun is shown to have grown up in poverty, before running away from home and being taken in by Dr. Glassman. Shaun's story is one of upward mobility where he has struggled to overcome early adversity to excel in a stable profession with a high income ceiling. While Shaun initially lives in somewhat lower socioeconomic circumstances (e.g., sparsely furnished apartment, difficulty paying rent without a roommate), he quickly seems to succeed both personally and financially as a resident at a major metropolitan hospital.

## Conclusion

The results of our analysis demonstrate that while more portrayals of neuroatypical and disabled characters on television are emerging, representations exploring the nuanced intersections of disability in society are clearly needed to promote social justice inclusive of neuroatypical and

disabled people. Positive representation includes highlighting the agency of disabled people, centring their strengths, and representing solutions to access barriers, all of which promote social justice by imagining inclusive fictional worlds that can inspire change in the real world. While the shows described here do include some of these representations, they also reproduce negative tropes (some more than others). Autism-focused shows reproduce tropes of the autistic person as a savant, a burden, and at times as creepy, dangerous, or rude. Comparison with shows featuring FASD and CP suggest that FASD is underrepresented (and deficit-focused), but that representations of CP have more successfully included actors and consultants with the featured disability. This difference may be related, at least in part, to visibility; while autism and FASD are sometimes described and understood as invisible; CP (being motor-related) is harder to “hide.” Casting decisions might also reflect implicit biases about whose stories are worthy of being told and by whom.

Attention to intersectionality also reveals the limited range of stories being told about disability and their emphasis on disability as the central social location of the characters. They maintain the “unmarkedness” or default assumption of white, male, non-disabled heterosexuality. This focus on white male protagonists serves to bracket disability as the only part of social identity that matters for them, despite the sometimes-explicit ways heterosexuality, masculinity, and whiteness very much matter in, and are constitutive of, their narratives. While individual stories of white autistic and disabled men are indeed important, the collective focus on white men’s experiences misses an opportunity to represent the diverse experiences of disabled people of any sexuality, gender, race, or class. Notably, while these shows do represent a range of experiences with class, the tendency to consider money only when convenient for the plot of a single episode may minimize the financial barriers facing many autistic and disabled people, portraying these barriers as easily resolved and not worth the long-term attention (e.g., in policy) that they warrant.

TV storytelling choices, at least among the shows we identified, are often a matter of convenience. In these instances, disability is neither convenient nor the norm in terms of representation (for characters, actors, writers, or directors). That same idea of storytelling convenience can extend into other areas of social experience tied to race, gender, sexuality, and class, where we see predominantly white straight men as default protagonists. Introducing other intersecting concerns as fundamental to a show’s storyworld could complicate narratives beyond what a show *about disability*, structured in less complex formats like episodic medical dramas or family sitcoms or even simpler serialized dramas, could support. Yet these shows, while often tackling complex issues tied to disability well, may not be structured to support intersecting stories. However, in its best form, TV can help us actively imagine a world with fewer barriers.

Given the results of our analysis, we support recommendations for more diverse stories about autistic people as well as people with other

neuroatypical or disabling experiences, including representations of strengths and successes, inclusion of disabled actors, and input from disabled individuals in storyline creation, writing, directing, and production. We also recommend that shows not bracket disability as the *one thing* a show addresses by reflecting on how presumed white maleness informs the stories being told and by including the stories of other kinds of people. This recommendation is in line with the way television is often structured, where shows aiming for longevity and renewal must often move beyond their original premise to maintain interest. Increasing diversity, especially diversity of autistic and disabled characters, would serve this purpose. Finally, we recommend more research on representation, disability, social justice, and television structure that critically explores these representations and their role in society, including the advancement of media disability studies to understand how diverse audiences receive, engage with, and construct understandings of neuroatypicality and disability as part of their larger communities.

Despite the concerns we raise in this paper about existing portrayals of autistic and disabled people on scripted television, we have seen an overall trend toward increasingly complex representations. What was once described and coded as quirky has become explicit, with recent shows being centrally *about* autism, autistic experiences, or disability broadly – as in the new show, *Everything's Gonna be Okay* (2020), which features an autistic teenage girl as a series regular portrayed by an autistic actor. We hope this trend continues and call for more attention to intersectionality when telling these stories.

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