The Forced Facade of ‘Normal’

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Context

Within this proposal my three key words will be explored, these will be supported by my three key thinkers and three key images. This piece of writing will demonstrate the link between autistic people being more likely to be transgender, and vice versa. Additionally I will be exploring the phenomena of ‘normal’ in relation to the two previous key words, autism and transgender to form a final question. Some examples of artists and thinkers I will be exploring include Drew Riley who creates LGBTQ+ paintings, Emma Peng Chien who is an autism researcher and philosopher, and Robin Dembroff who is a philosopher who focuses on gender.

Autism

Autism is a controversial topic. Some believe it can be cured, others believe it to be a terrifying and life destroying disorder, going as far as to compare it to AIDS (Luterman, 2020). While the truth of the matter is that autism is simply a different way of thinking. It has been thought that autistic people use a ‘bottom-up’ way of thinking rather than ‘top-down’. This means that autistic people more often “take in and process details in order to arrive at a conclusion”, often through sensory information, rather than “relating what they see to prior knowledge and experience” (Justine L, 2021).

Autism Speaks is a notoriously awful organisation, claiming to advocate for autistic people and the families of autistic children (Luterman, 2020). As seen in figures 1 and 2,

this organisation demonises autism severely to the point of claiming it is some sort of monster to be feared. In this advert they also claim that autism will “take away your children" (Willingham, 2013).

Fig. 1: *Screenshot of an Autism Speaks Advertisement*

I am autism.
I’m visible in your children, but if I can help it, I am invisible to you until it’s too late.
I know where you live.
And guess what? I live there too.
I hover around all of you.
I know no color barrier, no religion, no morality, no currency.
I speak your language fluently.
And with every voice I take away, I acquire yet another language.
I work very quickly.
I work faster than pediatric aids, cancer, and diabetes combined
And if you’re happily married, I will make sure that your marriage fails.
Your money will fall into my hands, and I will bankrupt you for my own self-gain.
I don’t sleep, so I make sure you don’t either.
I will make it virtually impossible for your family to easily attend a temple, birthday party, or public park without a struggle, without embarrassment, without pain.
You have no cure for me.
Your scientists don’t have the resources, and I relish their desperation. Your neighbors are happier to pretend that I don’t exist—of course, until it’s their child.
I am autism. I have no interest in right or wrong. I derive great pleasure out of your loneliness.

Fig. 2: *Autism Speaks Advertisement Transcript*

Many autistic people, as well as my first key thinker and autism researcher Chien Peng, believe that autistics are not lacking social skills, rather the case is that social norms within society fail to accommodate for any different way of thinking that doesn't fit into what we deem as 'normal' behaviour (Peng, 2017).

Children who act in an unusual or strange way to most people, often end up severely bullied throughout their time at school. Additionally many often experience bullying from their siblings and relatives (Toseeb et al, 2019). Many of these bullied people, outcast for being different, are autistic and act the way they do because of their autism (University of York, 2019). It is not something to be hidden or to be ashamed of, people should be free to act in 'unusual' or 'abnormal' ways as long as no one is being harmed in the process (Raypole, 2019).

Within the autistic community there are many well known organisations, myths, and stigma that are huge red flags. These are often pushed by what the internet is coining 'autism moms'. They are described as mothers of children with autism who view autism as taking away their child, and put themselves in the position of a hero for having an autistic child. This is a type of ableism; "imagine crying over your child's very existence" is a very good way of putting how these mothers act about their child having autism (Lightner, 2021).

Not only is autism extremely misunderstood, it is also very underdiagnosed in AFAB people, meaning assigned female at birth. This is due to the increased amount of

female born people who feel the need to mask their autism compared to men. Women are made to feel they should be small and quiet their whole lives which is one factor in why masking is more likely (Brescoll, 2012). Studies have shown that women are better at masking and camouflaging than men are. Additionally the current diagnostic criteria and assessment structure for autism is based on research that only considered male brains. This adds to the underdiagnosis of autism in women and AFAB people, as the symptoms differ depending on biological sex, as well as the gender they were raised as. Therefore doctors will often not be taught about symptoms displayed in anyone other than males, and will often dismiss the symptoms women and AFAB people experience (Meng-Chuan Lai, et al, 2017).

Masking autistic traits can have a negative effect on the autistic person, such as creating confusion within their sense of self, increasing their stress and anxiety, and causing exhaustion (Radulski, 2022). Studies have shown that autistic people have a lower life expectancy than the average population by sixteen years (Hirvikoski, et al, 2018). One of the reasons for this could be that masking in autistic people can cause an increase in depression and suicidal thoughts.

The Independent has reported attacks on autistic people, including police shootings and deaths. However this is less likely as there have been few recorded incidents of this occurring, but it is important to mention and bear this in mind (The Independent, 2020).

Transgender

Transgender, a concept that to some seems new, but that has been around since the beginning of mankind. While the word trans wasn't popularised until the 1960s in the UK, there have been signs of trans people existing thousands of years ago (Trans Hub, 2021). For example, there is a record of a trans priest called Gala in 5000-3000 BC, who took on feminine names despite being AMAB, meaning assigned male at birth (Agarwal, 2018). The phenomena of being born intersex occurs in around 1.7% of the population, making it a lot less rare than people usually assume. These people are usually forced to be one gender or the other, rather than being allowed to be themselves (InterAct, 2017). This makes them similar to, but not the same as, trans people.

Trans people exist everywhere, and it is a beautiful and amazing thing having everyone be individually themselves. Figure 3 shows artwork depicting a trans masculine person who has undergone 'top surgery' as it is known in the trans community. This artwork was made by Drew Riley, a trans woman, and it shows how intense the need to transition to the correct gender is, as people sometimes go through multiple surgeries. It also shows the beauty of being able to live your life as your true self (Raghallaigh 2014).

Fig. 3: *Cavan.*

Within many studies it has been found that there is a significant overlap with those who are transgender and those who are autistic. It has been suggested that this link is partly because autistic people struggle with understanding social concepts, such as some social cues as well as gender as a social construct (Schalkwyk, Klingensmith, Volkman, 2015). Some suggest it is more common because autistic people tend not to be influenced by social norms as much as neurotypical people (those whose brains have developed in a typical and expected way) (Rudy 2022).

Spectrums by Maxfield Sparrow provides an insight into the gender of contributor, Endever Corbin who goes by they/them or xe/xem pronouns.

> “My gender is autistic…my gender does not fit within normative social expectations associated with manhood and womanhood - just like my neurotype doesn’t fit into normative social expectations in general“
>
> (Sparrow, 2020, P81-83).

This creates an extremely interesting image of their gender identity, as it shows how tightly linked the two become to people with both identities. The use of xe/xem pronouns are known as neopronouns within the LGBTQIA+ community. Neopronouns are an alternative to she/her, he/him, or they/them pronouns. They can be used by anyone but mainly are used by trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people. Transgender is an umbrella term for many other identities, it simply means those who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth (Blevins, 2018). This includes many identities such as ftm meaning female to male, mtf meaning male to female, and nonbinary. Nonbinary is in itself an umbrella term, as well as genderqueer. Identities under these umbrella terms include genderfluid and agender. Nonbinary people have been found to date back to 400BC, despite many people thinking being nonbinary is a new ‘fad trend’. Figure 4 shows an example of either gender nonconforming or transgender people dating as far back as the Victorian Era (Simpson, 2013).

Fig. 4: *Photograph of Fanny and Stella from the Victorian Era.*

Robin Dembroff is a nonbinary philosopher professor at Yale University, and is my second key thinker. In their studies, Robin touches upon the issue of dismantling the gender binary in western cultures (Dembroff, 2018). While in non western and indigenous cultures third genders have been accepted for a very long time, some say centuries. Examples of this include the following, which has been paraphrased from Catlin Boice's research paper. "Muxes in Southern Mexico, Kathoey in Thailand, Hijra in India, Two-Spirit in Indigenous North America, and Mahu in Hawaii" (Synowiec, 2018). These are all examples of a third gender appearing in different cultures around the

world. The western world is far behind with accepting anything that does not conform to the gender binary (Voice, 2021).

‘Normal’

Within the psychological community, normality and abnormality are words used to describe certain behaviours or groups of behaviours. Different cultures have different versions of normal, and they have developed different social norms over a long period of time. Social norms include our “values, stereotypes, and conventions”, for example most people in western cultures tend to value money and social connections such as relationships and family (Sherif, 2016).

In other cultures, such as Eastern Germany for example, marriage is not viewed as very important. “Eastern Germany is a region with one of the world’s highest percentages of non-marital births” (Klärner, 2015).

The reason ‘normal’ is my final keyword is because of the significant link between what is viewed as ‘normal’ and how autistic and transgender individuals are perceived. As many people who are trans and/or autistic already know, the general public bully and mock those seen as anything below the standard of ‘normal’. Bullying can happen at any age, and it is traumatic, severely traumatic in certain cases (Cuncic, 2021). Particularly in children and adolescents, bullying can cause developmental issues as well as not being able to adjust in a ‘normal’ and ‘typical’ way (Salmivalli, Peets, 2018).

Recent studies have confirmed what many autistics have known for a long time from their personal experience, that bullying occurs more frequently in children with autism. As figure 5 shows, autistic children are far more likely to be bullied on a regular basis than their siblings without autism, or as some would say, their ‘normal’ siblings (University of York, 2019).

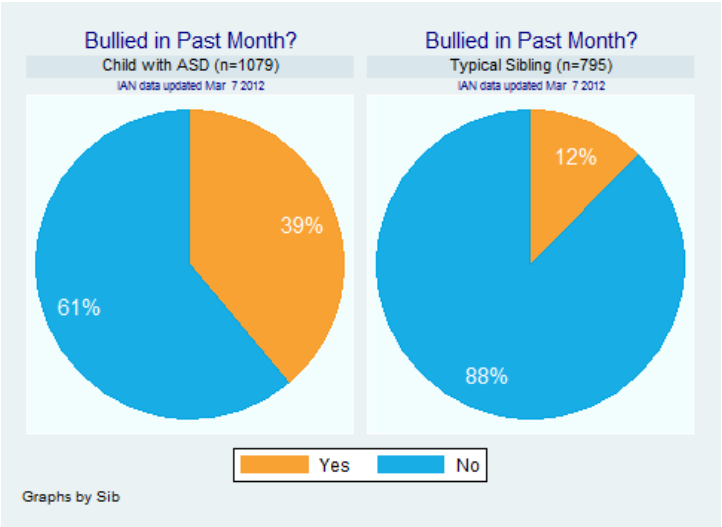

Fig. 5: *A Graph by Connie Anderson, 2014. Showing percentages autistic children being bullied compared to their non autistic siblings.*

This also has been found to occur in trans people, research has found that “83 percent of trans young people say they have experienced name-calling, and 35 percent have experienced physical attacks” (Beyond Bullying, 2020). Within the trans community, passing means blending in with the rest of society (Trans Hub, 2021). For example, appearing to be cisgender, meaning to identify as the same gender assigned to someone at birth (Zambon, 2021). This is one of the ways in which people deemed to be different are forced to appear normal to everyone else by the social norms of the society they live in.

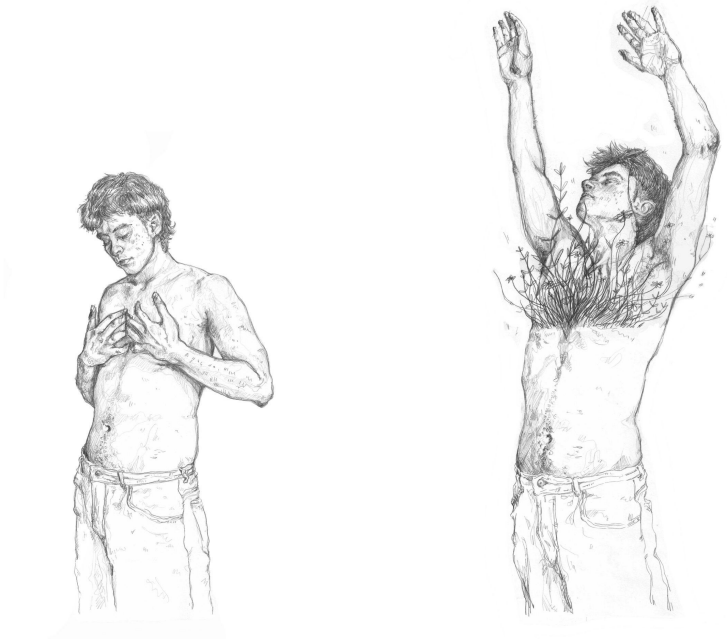

Fig. 6: *A pair stills from an animation created by Adam Benedict, 2021.*

Trans and autistic joy are important, particularly with all the discrimination faced by the people within these communities. It is extremely important to uplift one another as well as ourselves. As seen in figure 6, celebrating who we are as individuals brings a certain freedom, particularly within groups that face prejudice and discrimination on a daily basis.

Joy in both autistic and transgender people can be different for every individual, for many it is the ability to stop hiding away and to be able to truly be themselves. For others it is found in art and protest work, for example creating to express themselves or protesting for rights (Joseph, 2021). Self discovery and celebration are also encouraged when around others with similar differences to ourselves. It also helps trans and autistic people feel less alone and hopeless (Wright, 2020).

Autistic people tend to struggle to build relationships with non-autistic people because of the lack of understanding from the non-autistic individuals. This means autistic people tend to stick together because there is a mutual understanding and less need to mask (Crompton, 2020). Pride celebrations are an example of safe places for trans people. Often trans individuals do not feel safe going outdoors for fear of being discriminated against or even assaulted (Williams, 2021).

The internet has created both positives and negatives for the LGBTQ+ and autistic communities, as it has created many safe spaces and an easier way to meet other trans and autistic individuals (Austin, 2020). However it has also made it easier for bullies to target groups, particularly those who are already discriminated against. It is unclear if the positives outweigh the negatives. Regardless, it is here and is not going away any time soon.

Question Contextualisation

Through my exploration of my three key words I have discovered much more information to assist with creating questions than when I began. My main question is regarding the similarities between being autistic and transgender, and how they are linked together so strongly. My main working question is “How does art feed into the representation of minority groups? How does illustration specifically create joy within how it represents different people?” This question creates a solid ground for my sub-questions to link into, some of these sub-questions include; “What is meant by

celebrating our differences, is it purely positive?", "How does representation affect the viewer?", "Does representation have an impact on our self image?", and "Can education prevent and reduce prejudice and discrimination?". These sub-questions cover a lot of ground, while remaining specific to the groups being discussed. Within autistic and LGBTQ+ communities, discrimination, lack of representation, and facing shame while trying to celebrate their identities are all too common. In an ideal world I would want to use my creativity to create safe spaces and make people in minority groups feel seen, as well as making those who might be guilty of prejudice think about their own assumptions of others. Questioning ourselves is the first step in becoming better people in the long run, additionally listening to those in minority groups is also key to developing ourselves as people. Those in minority groups also need to listen to other groups they may not be a part of, as LGBTQ+ people can still be racist, sexist, and even discriminatory to those within their own community; as shown with the rise in the number of lesbians and gay men shunning trans people from the community. Another example of this is binary transgender people shunning nonbinary people and neopronoun users. For my extended essay I would like to delve into how artwork, particularly illustration, can provide some help and support for these groups. This could be in the form of educating those outside the communities, providing representation for those within the communities, and helping every individual to be able to celebrate their individuality.

Question

Autistic and Transgender Joy: How does art feed into the representation of minority groups, and can illustration create joy within how it represents different people?

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