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15 February 2016
SEGuE Conference Paper

Justifying Existence: Positioning Autism in a World of Capitalist Expectation

It is a tense moment. Carrie Brawshaw, the lead character on HBO's television series *Sex and the City*, is telling a friend about a new man she's been seeing. All is running smoothly until Carrie, played by Sarah Jessica Parker, casually mentions one particular detail of her new beau's life: he still lives with his parents. "So not sexy, honey," the friend exclaims. "Dump him immediately—here, use my cellphone."¹

A strong cultural expectation is made overwhelmingly apparent in this brief exchange: individuals are, generally speaking, expected to achieve a certain level of self-sufficiency in their lifetime. In today's post-industrial capitalist landscape, every individual is tasked in multiple arenas with contributing to the overall functioning and cohesion of the whole as well as providing for their own individual needs. For an individual to fail to achieve this self-sufficiency is deemed unsatisfactory—and even encroaches on the value the culture places on that person's worth as a human being.

This cultural ethos is called into question by the rise of the disabilities studies movement, particularly within the huge surge of literature concerning autism produced in recent years. The presence of disabled (or *differently abled*) individuals in a society clouds cultural expectations, begging questions to be asked regarding *how independent* an autistic individual can be expected to be and *in which ways* a person with autism *can* or *should* contribute to the fulfillment of their own needs. Complicating these matters is the

¹ *Sex and the City*. "Hot Child in the City." (New York: HBO. September 24th, 2000).

huge heterogeneity of autism's physical manifestations and symptoms coupled with the great multitude of possible hurdles often needing to be overcome. While much of an autistic individual's ability to integrate into the demands of the modern workforce is determined by the degree in which their behavior affects their competency to manage assigned tasks, much of this behavior is shaped by the environment the individual is surrounded by, such as the parents, teachers, advocacy organizations and institutions in which the individual is hired to work in. Capitalism privileges the neurotypical mind, and every autistic child faces an adult life affected by autism. This paper examines the attitudes and ideologies surrounding the manner in which autistic individuals achieve various degrees of self-sufficiency through entering the workforce, arguing that malleable social environments are capable of structuring and supporting the "pushing back" of limits imposed by autism, fostering the cultivation of a more self-sufficient individual, a recurring telos in the autism narrative genre.

The history of disability is, at its root, a history of difference. Dominant throughout the history of disability study has been a medical deficit model described by Davidson and Orsini as locating disability "in the individual" and supporting "efforts to cure" disabled persons to help them "overcome difficulties thought to originate from their own problematic embodiment."² Alternatively, a newer socially-based model has emerged in recent years formulated on a basis of viewing disability "as a product of people's interactions with disabling and unsupportive environments," where "rather than attempting to *fix* individuals," advocates desire "to accommodate the diverse needs of

² Davidson, Joyce and Michael Orsini. *Worlds of Autism: Across the Spectrum of Neurological Difference*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

disabled people in society through improvements to aspects of their social and material environments.”³ Roy Richard Grinker contends that autism “does not exist outside of culture,” with an infinitely complex spectrum of physical and cognitive possibilities grouped together under a single umbrella term fundamentally incapable of representing everything it claims to describe.⁴ These progressive ideas are supported in the outpouring of memoirs describing experiences with autism written in recent decades, nearly all of which report some level of progress based on deliberate changes to the social climate of their environment. Principally a reaction and accommodation to shifting levels of understanding of the physical symptoms affecting an autistic person’s interaction with the world, these environmental tweaks vary on a case-by-case system as there are generally understood to be no demonstrable core deficits of the disorder; instead, social models argue that objective data on autism “homogenize the diversity of autistic experience” and tend to “gloss over the situated knowledge of those most intimately affected by autism: autistic people themselves.”^{5 6}

The family of Owen Suskind face an array of difficult decisions as Owen grows into adulthood, a story detailed in the caregiver memoir *Life, Animated*. As a child, Owen began to stray outside his interior world only when others engaged his passion for Disney films and other animated coming of age tales, as is common among autistic

³ Ibid.

⁴ Grinker, Roy Richard. *Unstrange Minds: Remapping the World of Autism*. (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

⁵ Schreibman, Laura Ellen. *The Science and Fiction of Autism*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁶ Davidson, Joyce and Michael Orsini. *Worlds of Autism: Across the Spectrum of Neurological Difference*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

individuals. This technique worked successfully for a time in an effort to break Owen out of his shell, but as he grows older his father confronts anxieties over Owen's capability of functioning independently as an adult. Recognizing Owen's general inability to communicate to others outside of through Disney references and metaphors, he finds himself encouraging Owen to mention specific points of mutual reference, such as the obvious parallels between *The Lion King* and *Hamlet* in an effort to help Owen connect with what "pretty much everyone in America north of early childhood is supposed to know."⁷ This sentiment is echoed throughout the life-writing surrounding autism—Dawn Eddings Prince asserts part of her experience to be defined by an inability to cultivate even brief personal relationships easily with strangers because "if you couldn't speak the *lingua franca* of the normal, then you had to be stupid and therefore disposable."⁸ Owen is relatively high functioning—the communicative gap between him and the neurotypical world has little to do with breakdowns in language or non-verbal standards not being met, but rather functions to illustrate the differing value system placed on what are often considered narrow but extremely comprehensive appreciations of things generally considered useless by the neurotypical majority (things deemed *unprofitable*). Owen and his family seek a life path outside of living in his parents' basement; they turn over various college and college-like programs to find a bridge between worlds of autism and the demands of employment, all of which turn out to either be too expensive or are only facades for institutionalization.

⁷ Suskind, Ron. "*Life, Animated.*" (New York: Kingswell, 2014), 122.

⁸ Dawn Eddings Prince. "*All the Things I Have Ever Been: Autoethnographic Reflections on Academic Writing and Autism.*" *Worlds of Autism*, ed. Davidson, Joyce and Michael Orsini. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 321.

Owen's path to self-sufficiency can be termed a *vocational approach* to post-adolescent life. Following his interests, however narrow, Owen and his family are able to foster the development of a life that allows Owen to live as independently as possible. Though the fields suitable for these narrow interests (animation and film production) are highly competitive and there seems to be no room for those who cannot "keep up," Owen's parents, the primary agents constituting his environment, never allow him to be discouraged from his dream of bringing back hand-drawn animation, and this positivity and support are invaluable resources for Owen's success with his part-time job at a grocery store. This motivational factor, whether accomplished in the end or forever remaining an elusive goal to be reached for and worked toward, provides Owen the means to go out of his way to improve his life and allow others to assist him. Suskind anxiously notes that, when it comes to managing his life, at some point "Owen will have to do it on his own."⁹ His developing social skills will need to translate to those who know little about him and are not "experts in directing his path or helping him discover himself."¹⁰ The family decides to use Disney films to help Owen create his future, just as they did when he was still a mostly nonverbal three year old. The family trusts in the *neuroplasticity* of the human brain, its ability to find a way around what they term the "blockages of autism," but more so they're trusting in Owen and his seeming inability to give up on pushing the limits of his own self-sufficiency, step by step, as he makes his way to a small group home and eventually out into the world on his own.¹¹ They set up a "clubhouse" for Owen and a few friends to spend time at learning skills that help them

⁹ Ibid, 241.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 241.

to be successful in the real world, where they spend time role-playing job interview scenes, cooking, learning about personal finances such as balancing a checkbook, even how to use public transportation. In this supportive and patient environment, Owen makes great gains, eventually securing himself part-time employment at a grocery store and a spot in a college-like program that attempts to help in the maturation of individuals on the ASD spectrum.

Assimilating continually-developing autistic adults to the intricate social nuances of a particular community is a challenging process that must be undertaken gradually, step by step, on a basis determined by the individual's particular needs, strengths and limits. When Owen begins his part-time job, it is in two hour shifts twice a week which eventually stretch into four hours—which leave him utterly exhausted. The Suskinds justify the job as it teaches first-hand skills of budgeting (Owen spends \$2.50 of his \$4 gross pay at the video store), social interaction, punctuality (arriving to work on time as well as returning videos *he alone* is responsible for), even fostering a sense of community.

The progress Owen achieves over the course of *Life, Animated* reaches a high point when he conquers a final remaining obstacle to his grocery job. Like many others on the spectrum, Owen performs self-stimulation as a means of exerting control over his body and his incoming sensory perceptions, oftentimes in an effort to calm an anxious nervous system. His attention span typically runs five minutes before he must perform some sort of stimming mechanism, usually something involving his hands. Suskind expresses his concerns over Owen's workplace behavior, anxious "that he would be off-

putting and incomprehensible to the uninitiated, the non-expert, the stranger,” and then be treated poorly by the anonymous faces of the crowd.¹²

“Team Owen” devises a behavior modification program consisting of a “stim meter” which rates stimulatory behaviors on degree of disturbance they might cause, as well as a “stim replacement” therapy that exchanges high-disturbance stims such as Owen “jumping up and pacing” with a stim of a lower disturbance level, such as clenching a fist.¹³ The idea is to normalize Owen—to make him blend in with the crowd, to be an ordinary cashier. Of particular contention within the popular ASD community, specifically the highly-opinionated turf of online forums and web collectives, is the seeming need for the eradication of prominent autistic characteristics if an individual is to be accepted by society in a public role. Suskind confesses his recurring anxiety:

I can't help but think of Owen inside the apron. What of him? As a young adult, he's entering an ever more exacting, logical, mathematical world, that's discounted effort, alone, in favor of analytical abilities he'll never summon. Those who can will be the victors in his lifetime. He'll bump into plenty of them, I'm sure, as he grows. He doesn't register in their meritocracy. A nonperson. That means he should be happy and grateful to wear that uniform for the rest of his life.¹⁴

Public arenas such as grocery stores demand a standard of behavior to be met by both customers and employees, a code of conduct enforced by both groups of the shared space; in the same vein as how a crying toddler might elicit stares from passerbys in the checkout line, a clearly-stimming grocery employee runs the strong risk of drawing negative, potentially harmful attention to himself and to the company employing him. To a parent or friend of an autistic individual, this is of little concern. What Suskind worries

¹² Ibid, 288.

¹³ Ibid, 289.

¹⁴ Ibid, 309.

is that, in many instances, it is unprofitable to employ an autistic employee, even before taking on issues of focus, physical competency, ability to pick up on social cues, ability to answer and respond properly to questions, even the ability to improvise without direct guidance, as a typical employee will be expected to do at a certain point. A profit-driven system, where the bottom line means everything—both for companies and for individuals—leaves little room for those incapable of “competing.” In so many instances, the autistic individual is pushed out because their cognitive behavior patterns do not fit with the conventional, cookie-cutter forms demanded by 21st century business models, which demand social and behavioral performances individuals such as Owen may be unable to fit seamlessly in to.

Suskind’s painfully honest observation that many in the cold, profit-centric world view his son as a “non-person” confirms Owen’s status as an *othered* being, an individual marked as non-conformative to the values deemed profitable to the ruling neurotypical marketplace, where existence itself comes packaged with rules pre-fitted to exclude the unusual from the conventional normative workplace. Sanctioned, authorized behaviors are created in a business environment for a specific purpose: profit. The constitution of personhood has become so entwined with the ability to further the economic functioning of a society that we often unable to see outside of it, the non-worker becoming a non-person. Business efficiency has become a necessary ingredient to personhood. The autistic non-person is rendered a non-human, worthy of pity, compassion, with celebration of neurodiversity often reserved only for circus-like savant media sensations that come and pass with much fanfare and little lasting impact.

Connected inseparably to capitalist systems are ideologies affecting human life based upon market demand, competition, wage labor and private ownership. Attached to these ideas is a culture-wide linking of productivity with personhood, of economic fertility with identity. Mark Osteen retorts that “our society’s ideology of bourgeois individualism and personal productivity does not know what to do with those who cannot *compete or produce*.”¹⁵

The constitution of personhood has become so entwined with the ability to further the economic functioning of the collective capitalist society that we are often unable to see the human being outside of it. As Carrie Bradshaw’s *Sex and the City* dilemma aptly points out, the issue of self-sufficiency is in no way unique to the disability community. The autistic individual’s personhood in society directly correlates with the demands of self-sufficiency imposed by a culture all-too-often driven by motives of profit. The neurotypical world would do well to remember that while differences and profit may speak, comradeship and tolerance speak louder.

¹⁵ Osteen, Mark. Introduction to *Autism and Representation*. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

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