



Analyzing the discourse surrounding Autism in the New York Times

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Autism Timeline



Purpose of Study

- Conduct a thematic and content analysis of the New York Times in order to get an idea how autism is covered.
- Analyze the coverage of autism in the NYT using an ableism (ability expectations) lens.
- Infer what implications the coverage of autism in the NYT may have for the public's perception and understanding of autism

Introduction

- Autism has gained considerable attention in the media in the past 40 years.
- Autism is seen as an important health and medical issue
- Autism is investigated widely within academic circles
- Newspapers play an important role in shaping peoples' perception and understanding (1,2,3).
- The NYT is a particularly influential media source, even by its own self understanding

Methods

- Used ProQuest New York Times (University of Calgary) database as the source of data from 1973-2011
- Used 'autism' as a keyword in the title as a criterion for selecting relevant articles that discussed autism (196 relevant articles found)
- Performed a content and thematic analysis using an ableism lens
- Created a timeline that outlines the major themes that emerged using 10 year increments.

Discussion

What main themes do we see covered in the NYT? What themes are not covered?

- Autism was heavily covered through a medical lens. Some of which include: search for a cause, search for a cure, treatments, results of treatments, symptoms etc.
- Biological and genetic endowment and physical environment was a major theme in the NYT, as genetics and the environment are believed to play an important role in causing autism.
- Discussions of education were focused on the rights of individuals with disabilities to get free appropriate education, however there was no mention of how many autistic individuals get a post secondary education, or any sort of education at all.
- Very few articles discussed social determinants of health such as employment /unemployment, education, social status, quality of life of people with autism although social determinants are considered important in contributing to one's health.

References:

- (1) New York Times, "The Civitas reception," New York Times, 2 May 1895.
- (2) David Paul Nord, "A Republican Literature: A Study of Magazine Reading and Readers in Late Eighteenth-Century New York," American Quarterly 40, no. 1 (1988): 42-64, (1 Nov. 2008).
- (3) New York Times Magazine, "On the Means of Preserving Public Liberty," New York Times Magazine, 1790

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- Very few articles discussed: the rights of individuals with autism such as equality, non-discrimination, inclusion in society, combating stereotypes etc.
- We see discussions of the desire for acceptance and the neurodiversity perspective of autism emerging in the last 10 years although the neurodiversity angle is vastly underrepresented.