

Autism on screen may reinforce stereotypes, study finds

September 11 2017

Fictional portrayals of autistic people - such as The Big Bang Theory's Sheldon Cooper - are not fully representative of those with the condition, research suggests.

Experts have found that the characters tend to be unrealistically aligned with textbook diagnostic criteria and do not accurately reflect the variety seen in real life.

The team from the Universities of Edinburgh and Oslo analysed Sheldon's character along with a further 25 fictional personalities from TV and film.

They judged each character against the standard criteria that doctors use to diagnose autism, known as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or DSM-5.

Most of the characters displayed at least nine of the 12 defining characteristics of the condition, the researchers found.

In reality, this level of alignment with the diagnostic criteria is rare.

About half of those analysed are portrayed as being a genius or having some other exceptional skill - such as Dustin Hoffman's character in the 1988 film Rain Man.

In reality, the researchers say, fewer than one in three people with autism

will have such a skill.

The researchers say this narrow view may reinforce widely held stereotypes about autistic people.

The study is published in the journal *Psychiatry Research*.

More information: Anders Nordahl-Hansen et al, Mental health on screen: A DSM-5 dissection of portrayals of autism spectrum disorders in film and TV, *Psychiatry Research* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psychres.2017.08.050](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2017.08.050)

Provided by University of Edinburgh

Citation: Autism on screen may reinforce stereotypes, study finds (2017, September 11) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-09-autism-screen-stereotypes.html>

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