

Washington Post's depictions of autism shift from 'cause and cure' to acceptance

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"The Post's coverage reflected a widespread belief that having a disability is okay if you're able to fit into a neurotypical world or if it offers a special talent or skill with social value, like being really good with computers," said Noa Lewin (Kresge College, '18, psychology and sociology), whose undergraduate senior thesis was the basis of the study. Credit: of Noa Lewin

The Washington Post's depiction of autism has shifted over the years

from a focus on "cause and cure" toward one of acceptance and accommodation, say the authors of a study that examined 315 articles published from 2007 to 2017.

The findings, which appear in the current online edition of *Disability and Society*, suggest that media representations are changing to reflect new public attitudes generated in part by the autistic rights movement, say co-authors Noa Lewin, a 2018 graduate of the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Nameera Akhtar, a professor of psychology at UCSC.

"There's less focus on cause and a bigger focus on accommodation," said Lewin, whose undergraduate senior thesis was the basis of the study. "Coverage has shifted more toward how to make life better for autistic people and less on what is causing autism."

The paper, "Neurodiversity and Deficit Perspectives in the Washington Post's Coverage of Autism," is based on a content analysis of coverage beginning in 2007, before the putative link between the MMR vaccine and autism had been completely debunked. It ends 10 years later, when the neurodiversity rights movement had advanced understanding and awareness about the range of ways brains function and that variations from "normal" are not necessarily deficits. The researchers chose to examine the influential Washington Post because it is widely read by legislators and policy makers.

Akhtar, the corresponding author of the paper, is at the forefront of paradigm-shifting scholarship about autism and has called for greater understanding of autism. "The autism self-advocacy movement has been around for a while, but the idea that autism is something that should be accommodated rather than 'cured' is new for people who haven't been exposed to it," she said.

In their analysis, Lewin and Akhtar found that the Post's articles over

time were more likely to talk about "neurodiversity" and to acknowledge the strengths of autistic people. Articles also began to describe accommodations for autistic people, and a few began to feature the voices of autistic people themselves—a trend Lewin, who is autistic, particularly appreciated.

"I remember one article about autism-related legislation that quoted a member of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN)," said Lewin, who links the increased visibility of people with autism to the broader disability-rights movement. "We tend to think of a disability as a medical tragedy, and we don't think about how attitudes, systemic ableism, and barriers contribute to that."

Although the paper's coverage over time gradually placed more emphasis on autistic skills and strengths, coverage continued to use negative terms to describe autistic people. For example, the terms "high functioning" and "low functioning" continue to appear, despite autistic advocates' preference for more specific language, such as "speaking" and "non-speaking." And the emphasis on strengths was on [autistic people](#) who can do things like speak conversationally and hold jobs.

"The Post's coverage reflected a widespread belief that having a disability is okay if you're able to fit into a neurotypical world or if it offers a special talent or skill with social value, like being really good with computers," said Lewin.

Akhtar is pleased to see media representations of autism changing, and she was delighted to collaborate with Lewin on the paper. "Autistic people should be involved in research about [autism](#)," she said. "I was happy to work with Noa and to gain this insider's perspective. I learned a lot. You learn to broaden your way of thinking by interacting with people with different experiences."

More information: Noa Lewin et al, Neurodiversity and deficit perspectives in The Washington Post's coverage of autism, *Disability & Society* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2020.1751073](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2020.1751073)

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