

The Curious Incident of Autism Myths in the Portrayal of an Autistic Character

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the portrayal of an autistic character in relation to autism myths in the novel written by Mark Haddon in 2003 entitled *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. Autistic characters have gained considerable attention in many contemporary literary works. Within the realm of autism myths and method of textual analysis, the main character in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) was analyzed to see if it is constructed on the stereotypical autistic character. It is found that the autistic character in the novel is portrayed as an autistic child who has a tendency to avoid social contact with others, independent, affectionate and has special talent and savant skill. Moreover, the study also reveals that the portrayal of an autistic character in the novel confirms three myths of autism but negates four other myths. These findings show that current literary works still rely on the myths of autism that are formed by society to portray an autistic character.

Keywords: autism, autistic character, myths of autism, portrayal

INTRODUCTION

Autism, as defined by The National Autistic Society (2017), is a permanent developmental disability that influences the way a person communicates, relates to other people, and experiences the surroundings. Nowadays, the topic of autism have become one of the topics that are raised frequently in literary works. There are a number of literary works published with autism as their main topic.

One of the works with autism as the topic is a movie entitled *Rain Man* which was released in 1988. Sole-Smith, (2014) noted that the topic of autism with an autistic character that is raised by this movie is important to make people more aware of autism. Another literary work which raises the topic of autism with an autistic character is *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, a novel by Mark Haddon which was published in 2003. The novel is considered to "have an authentic story and received an enthusiastic welcome in medical circles" (Johansson, 2008, p. 2). The novel has been

sold in more than two million copies in 2003 and won a number of awards including Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, Costa Book of the Year and Waverton Good Read Award. Besides, there are also a number of other literary works such as novels, movies and even TV show which raise the topic of autism and present autistic characters.

However, there are many literary works that portray an autistic character based on the stereotypes of autism. In the previous study by Young (2012), it was obvious that the portrayal of autistic characters in media such as literary works is based on the stereotypes formulated by society. In the study, Young (2012) selected a number of literary works and television shows and compared them to the myths of autism. Consequently, the study found that the characterization of autistic characters in the selected works confirmed the myth of autism. The autistic characters in the selected works are depicted as having verbal communication difficulties, unable to respond and show affection, never smile, inclined to avoid eye contact and insensible to

signals from other individuals. The findings of the study show that many literary works still portray autistic characters in stereotypical characteristics and put autistic characters in a terrible condition. Therefore, it can affect people's perception towards autistic person since stereotypical autism may lead to generalization.

In addition, Bartkowski (2017) prove that people with autism cannot be placed in stereotypical characteristics. Bartkowski (2017), who was diagnosed to have Asperger Syndrome, writes an article which reveals the fact that the stereotypes of autism cannot be applied to every autistic person. The article lists ten stereotypes of autism and elaborates how five of them match hers while the others do not.

Consequently, the topic of autism and autistic characters also engage people to conduct studies in various literary works. Young (2012) conducted a study to examine the representation of autism in films entitled *Rain Man* and *Mercury Rising*, and TV shows

entitled *Parenthood*, and *Arthur*. Meanwhile, Hanley (2015) investigated viewers perception of mental illness based on its portrayal in a number of Hollywood movies.

There were also a number of studies that were specifically conducted on the novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog In the Night-time* (2003). Chodratillah (2016), for example, used focalization of the novel to investigate autistic character development, while Semino (2014ab), Johansson (2008), Tsumoto and Black (2015), Luckin (2013), Kupperts (2008) also examined cases related to the autistic character and autism in the novel using different approaches either in linguistics or literature.

Unfortunately, none of the studies regarding *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) focused on the characterization of the autistic character and its connection to the stereotypes of autism. Given that stereotypes of autism place autistic character in typical characteristics, it is important to investigate how the autistic character in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) is portrayed and in what way

the portrayal relates to the stereotypes of autism. The novel was chosen because, despite its simple language and detective-like story, it gives insight into an autistic character's mind.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to accomplish the aims, the theories of autism, stereotypes of autism and characterization are used as the framework for this study.

Autism

According to The National Autistic Society (2017), autism is a permanent developmental disability that influences the way a person communicates, relates to other people, and experiences the surroundings. Furthermore, Williams and Wright (2004) mentioned that the first three years of a child's life is the common period when Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) becomes noticeable. The disorder itself is divided into three subtypes, they are autistic disorder, Asperger syndrome, and pervasive

developmental disorder (Autism Support of West Shore, 2014). However, the cause of ASD is still debatable. Autism Society (2015, n.p.) mentioned that "there is no known single cause for autism spectrum disorder". Instead, Autism Society (2015, n.p.) added that abnormalities in brain structure or function are generally accepted as the cause of ASD.

Autism Spectrum Disorder, as mentioned by Williams and Wright (2004), will have an impact on several aspects of children's lives, especially the way they communicate, interact in social life, behave and imagine things. The impact will continue into their teenage years and adulthood even though there are no established criteria for how the ASD demonstrates itself (Williams and Wright, 2004). However, people often depict autistic people based on the stereotypes that are believed by general society. Therefore, for the sake of present study the discussion on autism will focus more on the stereotypes in real life and in literature.

Stereotypes of Autism

First of all, it should be clarified what stereotypes mean before explaining the stereotypes of autism. Stereotype, as defined by Stangor (2009), is a depiction of the characteristic of social groups or individual that is perceived by people in order to distinguish the group or individual from each other. Indeed, Stangor (2009) simplified stereotypes as "the traits that come to mind quickly when we think about the groups" (p. 2). Finally, Stangor (2009) also believed that stereotypes, along with prejudice, is problematic because it has led people to adopt the characteristics of early conceptualization, which are: inaccuracy, negativity and overgeneralization.

Related to the topic of the study, Young (2012), who conducted a study of the representation of autism in media, found that media including literary works frequently portray autistic characters based on stereotypes formulated by society. Young (2012) found that even though the

works had their own distinct storyline, each of selected works relied greatly on the myths of autism. There are many myths about autism that are accepted by general society. Hence, it seems that the accepted myths have become the stereotypes that are believed by people and used to portray an autistic person. Registered by Autism Resource Centre Singapore (2017), there are nine myths of autism that are commonly accepted by society. They are:

1. Autistic people inclined to avoid social contact
2. Autistic people cannot achieve independent and successful lives
3. Autism is the result of bad parenting
4. Autistic people always have savant skills and special talent
5. Autism can be cured
6. Autistic people inclined to avoid eye contact
7. Autistic people are unable to talk
8. Autistic people can overcome autism

9. Autistic people do not have feeling and unable to show affection

Characterization

In order to analyze whether the presence of the autistic character in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) confirms or negates the stereotypes of autism, this study needs to identify the characterization of the autistic character beforehand. Therefore, the characterization of the autistic character in the novel is identified using the theoretical framework of characterization which is mainly formulated by Rimmon-Kenan (2002).

Rimmon-Kenan (2002) claimed that any feature of the text can act as a guideline of character, however, only some of them are regularly associated with characterization. There are two fundamental types of textual guideline of character that are believed by Rimmon-Kenan (2002), they are direct and indirect characterization. Direct characterization, as defined by

Rimmon-Kenan (2002), can be provided by four traits which are an adjective (e.g. 'she is beautiful'), an abstract noun ('her kindness knows no limits'), some other kind of noun ('he was a real hero') or part of speech ('she hates her family'). On the other hand, Rimmon-Kenan (2002) stated that indirect characterization does not indicate the trait in the text directly but by illustrating it in different ways. This types of characterization will make the reader try to determine the characteristics themselves.

It is mentioned by Rimmon-Kenan (2002) in the book that indirect characterization is achieved through a number of manners: action, speech, external appearance, and environment. In the manners of action, Rimmon-Kenan (2002) stated that the characterization can be determined by one-time and habitual actions. In addition, in the manner of speech, it is determined by both conversation or silent speech in the mind (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). Meanwhile, in external appearance manner, the characterization can be determined by two different features, which are: external appearance which is presented

beyond the control of the characters (height, colour of eyes) and the appearances which slightly depend on the characters like hairstyle and clothes (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). In the manner of environment, Rimmon-Kenan (2002) only mentioned that the characterization can be shown through the physical and human environment of the characters.

In addition, Rimmon-Kenan (2002) listed analogy as one of the manners of indirect characterization. However, this study focuses more on the manners of action, speech and external appearance of indirect characterization as well as direct characterization based on the analysis of the text.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study employs textual analysis as the research method. Textual analysis is relevant because the data is in the form of textual evidence and narrative which are collected by using close reading. The characterization and portrayal of the autistic character in the novel

and how it relates to the stereotypes of autism is the main data that is analyzed in this study.

To come to the findings, the study followed a certain procedure. The first step is by doing close reading of the novel to become familiar with the context and the story of the novel before re-read the novel and taking notes of the relevant characterizations and portrayal of autistic character in the novel. The myths of autism stated by Autism Resource Centre Singapore were employed in this particular step. After that, the identified characterizations and the portrayal of the autistic character were categorized into excerpt, description, types of characterization, stereotypes of autism and analysis.

After all textual evidence was noted and compiled, it was the time to conduct the analysis. Every single identified evidence of characterization and the portrayal of autistic character in the novel was elaborated by identifying how the portrayal is presented in the novel. Afterwards, the manner of characterization was also compiled in the category of characterization. In scrutinizing the

characterizations and portrayal of autistic character in the novel, this study employs Rimmon-Kenan's (2002) theory of characterization. The analysis of characterization in this study focused more on whether it was direct or indirect characterization. Finally, the analysis moves to the myth of autism and reveals its relation to the characterization of autistic character in the novel.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis regarding the portrayal of the autistic character in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) that employs the theory of characterization stated by Rimmon-Kenan (2002) and myths of autism by Autism Resource Singapore (2017) reveals that the relevant characterizations are portrayed either through direct or indirect characterizations in the narration and action of the autistic character. The novel portrays Christopher as an autistic child who has the tendency to avoid social contact with others, independent, affectionate and has special talent

and savant skill. Moreover, the analysis of this study found that the portrayal of Christopher meets three myths of autism but negates four of the myths. The revealed characterization and its relation to the stereotypes of autism will be explained and discussed in the following section.

Christopher Boone is portrayed in the novel as a boy who is inclined to avoid social contact such as touching, being in small room with strangers, or having eye contact. The first two are mentioned by Christopher as he lists 18 behavioural problems that he experiences in chapter 73. In one occasion, the narration of Christopher Boone directly shows his aversion and reaction after being touched by a stranger. "The policeman took hold of my arm and lifted me onto my feet. I didn't like him touching me like this. And this is when I hit him" (Haddon, 2003, p. 8). It can be seen that Christopher does not like being touched and then hits the policeman to show his aversion. Furthermore, Christopher also lists that he did not like being in small places with strangers as his behavioural problem. Therefore, he narrates that if he has to

go to the other town to continue his study in university, he prefers to move to another city with his family rather than live in a house and has contact with another student (Haddon, 2003, p. 45).

Even though it is not mentioned in the list of Christopher's behavioural problems, he is also portrayed as a boy who does not make eye contact when talking to people. For instance, Christopher does not look at Mr Thompson's face while he asks about the murder of Mrs Shears' dog since Mr Thompson is a stranger. It can be seen from his narration which states, "I did not look at his face. I do not like looking at people's faces, especially if they are strangers." (Haddon, 2003, p. 36). Without looking at people's face when talking to them, it is highly possible that Christopher obtains distorted meaning since people sometimes express certain message in facial expression and eye contact. Also, in chapter 43 it is clearly seen that Christopher love it when his father talked to him about the death of his

mother without looking at him. He narrates that "Usually people look at you when they're talking to you. I know that they're working out what I'm thinking, but I can't tell what they're thinking. It is like being in a room with a one-way mirror in a spy film. But this was nice, having Father speak to me but not look at me" (Haddon, 2003, p. 22). As can be seen from that excerpt, Christopher actually knows that commonly people look at their addressee when they talk to each other. However, he feels uncomfortable with eye contact in conversation because he cannot understand what people are thinking when he looks at them. As a result, Christopher has a tendency to see everything based only his point of view without considering other's opinion.

Despite his autistic syndrome, it is evident that Christopher is an independent child. It is in accordance with the findings of the study by Chodratillah (2016) which stated that Christopher turns into an independent boy after facing a number of struggles especially during his journey to London. He has the ability to do

certain things by himself. For instance, in chapter 127 Christopher narrates that "I made myself a raspberry milkshake and heated it up in the microwave and then went through to living room to watch one of my *Blue Planet* videos about life in deepest parts of the ocean" (Haddon, 2003, p. 79). It can be seen that he does not need any help from his parents or someone else to have a milkshake after school although it is quite strange that he serves it hot while milkshake is commonly served cold. Furthermore, Christopher also goes to take the train by himself when he decides to go to London after knowing that his father is the murderer of Mrs Shears' dog. His independency can be seen from this narration, "I made a decision that I would have to find out how to get to the train station and I would do this by asking someone" (Haddon, 2003, p. 137). Even though he faces a number of difficulties as the consequence of his autism, he manages to reach the station to take the train to London independently. By looking at the textual evidences

it can be concluded that Christopher can cope with a number of difficulties from his autistic tendency and become an independent child.

Furthermore, Christopher is also characterized as a loving and expressive child. However, in some cases, he does not show his affection the way common people do. For instance, it is mentioned in Chapter 23 that Christopher shows his affection towards his mother while he knows that she is sick and has to go into hospital. His affection is shown in this particular dialogue and narration, "I said, "We will need to take food to her," because I knew that food in hospital was not very good" (Haddon, 2003, p. 23). Moreover, in the same chapter, Christopher also narrates that he need to make his mother a Get Well card since she is sick and has to stay in hospital. "I said I would make her a Get Well card because that is what you do for people when they are in hospital" (Haddon, 2003, p. 23). However, the way he shows his affection is quite unusual. He always accompanies his affection with logical reason. This finding shows that autistic

people are able to feel compassion but they express it differently.

Furthermore, the analysis found that Christopher is portrayed as a child with special talent and savant skill. His special talent and savant skill are presented frequently in the novel, one of them is portrayed directly through his narration which says that he will become the first student who takes A level in maths. "I am going to prove that I'm not stupid. Next month I'm going to take my A level in maths and I'm going to get an A grade. No one has ever taken an A level at our school before, and the headmistress, Mrs Gascoyne, didn't want me to take it at first. She said they didn't have the facilities to let us sit A-levels" (Haddon, 2003, p. 44). Surprisingly, at the end of the story, it is presented that he manages to take the test and gets an A for his A level maths. The evidence can be seen from this particular narration, "And I got the results of my maths A level and I got an A grade, which is the best result, and it made me feel like this ☺" (Haddon, 2003, p. 220).

In addition, Christopher also shows his savant skill frequently along the novel. For instance, in chapter 19, he tells the reason why he numbers the chapter of the novel with prime numbers. Also, he explains in his narration how to work with prime numbers in detail just like an expert or a teacher. "This is how you work out what prime numbers are. First, you write down all the positive whole numbers in the world. Then you take away all the numbers that are multiples of 2. Then you take away all the numbers that are multiples of 3. Then you take away all the numbers that are multiples of 4 and 5 and 6 and 7 and so on" (Haddon, 2003, p. 11). His savant skill can be seen in almost every chapter of the novel, especially when he talks about anything that deals with number, order, or logical thinking. In terms of savant skill and special talent, this finding shows that Christopher has an identical portrait with the other autistic characters in the study by Young (2012) especially in film entitled *Rain Man* (1988) and *Mercury Rising* (1998).

However, since Young (2012) found that many media portrayed

autistic characters based on the stereotypes of autism formulated by common society, there is a possibility that *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) also portrays Christopher Boone, the autistic character, based on the myths of autism. Indeed, it is evident that the analysis found some sort of relation between the characterizations of Christopher Boone and the myths of autism by Autism Resource Centre Singapore (2017).

The portrayal of Christopher Boone as an autistic character confirms three myths of autism by Autism Resource Centre Singapore (2017). For example, it is mentioned that autistic people are frequently described as the one who is inclined to avoid social contact. Regardless the falsehood of this particular myth, indeed Christopher is portrayed as an autistic child who has a tendency to avoid social contact such as having eye contact, touching, and being in small room with strangers. Besides, his tendency to not make any eye contact with others also confirms

the myth of autism by Autism Resource Centre Singapore (2017) which states that autistic people do not make eye contact. The portrayal of Christopher Boone which presents him as a child with special talent and savant skill is also relatable to another myth of autism by Autism Resource Centre Singapore (2017) which states similarly. It is evident that Christopher's capability to be the first student who takes A level in maths and always explains almost anything in detail with logical thinking like a scientist indicate his savant skill and special talent.

On the other hand, the portrayal of Christopher Boone as an autistic character also negates four other myths in certain ways. The myths are: autistic people cannot have independent and successful life, autistic people do not have feelings and unable to show affection, autism can be outgrown, and autistic people cannot talk.

The myths which state that autistic people cannot have independent and successful life, and do not have feelings and unable to show affection are disputed since Christopher Boone is portrayed as an

independent child who has a successful life in academic terms, affectionate and capable to show his feelings. It can be seen from the narration of the novel that he can independently do a number of things by himself and manages to pass the A-level test in maths. Also, it is clearly stated in the findings section that Christopher is portrayed as an affectionate child which be seen, for example, from his action and narration when his mother has to stay in hospital.

The way this novel portrays autistic child also negates the myths which state that "autism can be outgrown" (Autism Resource Centre Singapore, 2017). It is evident that Christopher develops his personality in the novel, however, he still cannot outgrow his autism. In chapter 71, Christopher says that he and his family have to move to another town if he has to continue his study to university because he does not live on his own or with the other students. Meanwhile, in chapter 233, he says that he will move to another town to continue his study

in the university and live in a flat. It can be assumed that he plans to live alone in the flat rather than in a shared house with the other students. It means that he still has tendency to avoid social contact with strangers, which is the part of his autism, but his recent adventure with the world reduces his autistic tendency. In brief, it can be said that he does not outgrow his autism but it may reduce as he develops after what happened to him.

Meanwhile, the portrayal of Christopher Boone seems like it does not fully negate the particular myth of autism which says that autistic people cannot talk. It can be seen clearly from the novel that he is having a dialogue with other people even though it goes unusually in some cases since he does not like to talk to strangers. For instance, in chapter 67 Christopher investigates the death of the dog by asking his neighbour named Mrs Alexander. The conversation goes as follows, "And she said, "You're Christopher, aren't you." I said, "Yes. I live at number 36." And she said, "We haven't talked before, have we." I said, "No. I don't like talking to strangers. But I'm doing detective work." And

she said, "I see you every day, going to school" (Haddon, 2003, p. 39). However, it can be seen from his narration that he avoids having further conversation with Mrs Alexander. "I didn't reply to this either because Mrs Alexander was doing what is called chatting, where people say things to each other which aren't questions and answers and aren't connected" (Haddon, 2003, p. 40). Based on the excerpts, it can be noticed that Christopher has the ability to talk but not to communicate. He actually understands that communication and conversation are not only about obtaining information. Also, it is also evident that Christopher has socialization and communication difficulties such as mentioned in the study by Semino (2014). However, the main issue is that he has no desire to get into the game of communication because Mrs Alexander is a stranger and his intention to talk is limited only to obtain information regarding the murder of the dog. Therefore, since communication is more than talking, it can be

concluded that he is an autistic child who is able to talk but have no desire to start and to be in a conversation especially with strangers.

Aside from the discussion of Christopher Boone's portrayal as an autistic character, it seems like the novel carries an issue of narrator's unreliability since most of the characterization is done through the narration of Christopher Boone as the first-person narrator and the main character. As mentioned by Riggan (1981), first-person narrator is the most prevalent type of narrator that has possibility to be unreliable. Riggan (1981) classified unreliable narrator into five types, which one of them is called The Naif. The Naif, based on Riggan (1981), is the type of first-person narrator who has an immature or limited perception which only based on their point of view. As we can see, the definition of The Naif first-person narrator is match with *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003). Christopher is, seemingly, an immature since he is only fifteen years old and the point of view is limited only on Christopher's. For instance, it

can be seen from this particular narration:

Terry, who is the older brother of Francis, who is at the school, said I would only ever get a job collecting supermarket trollies or cleaning out donkey shit at an animal sanctuary and they didn't let spazzers drive rockets that cost billions of pounds. When I told this to Father he said that Terry was jealous of my being cleverer than him. Which was a stupid thing to think because we weren't in a competition. But Terry is stupid, so quod erat demonstrandum, which is Latin for which is the thing that was going to be proved, which means thus it is proved. (Haddon, 2003, pp. 25)

I'm not a spazzer, which means spastic, not like Francis, who is a spazzer, and even though I probably won't become an astronaut, I am going to go to university and study mathematics, or physics, or physics and mathematics (which is a Joint Honor School), because I like mathematics and physics and I'm very good at them. But Terry won't go to university. Father says Terry is most likely to end up in prison. (Haddon, 2003, pp. 26)

As can be seen from the narration above, even though there is the other view from Terry and his father, Christopher still narrates it with his point of view. This idea is supported by Semino (2014) who found that the massive number of first-person deictic expression such as 'I', 'me' and 'my' in this novel indicates that Christopher is unusually focused only on himself. Moreover, Christopher also uses high frequency of 'and' in his narration about Francis which is indicated as immature since Semino (2014, p. 286) said that it is "associated with child-narrators or with characters/narrators who have child-like minds".

In addition, based on the analysis, the narrator is also unreliable because in one particular case he tends to avoid something that he knows. For example, in chapter 67, it is noticed that he avoid to have a proper conversation with Mrs. Alexander while actually he knows how to communicate properly. Therefore, It demonstrates that the narrator is not that innocent and can be unreliable.

All in all, regardless its relation to the myths of autism and the issue of unreliable narrator, the portrayal of the

autistic character in this novel is rather unique. Even though the characters in Young's (2012) study are portrayed based on similar myths of autism, it is evident that the portrayal of autistic character in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) has some sort of differences. Unlike Christopher who is portrayed as an affectionate child and able to show his feelings, Young (2012) revealed that most of the autistic characters in film and TV shows like *Rain Man*, *Mercury Rising*, *Arthur* and *Parenthood* rarely showed their affection and feelings. Their feelings were showed infrequently and only in a form of smile. In contrast, Christopher is portrayed as a child who is affectionate and show his feelings frequently, even though it is quite unusual since he always tries to state the logical reason for his feelings. Moreover, unlike the other autistic characters in *Rain Man* and *Mercury Rising* who are portrayed to be accompanied by another person in almost every moment of the story, Christopher is not always accompanied by another

person and does almost anything by himself including his investigation of the murdered dog. This makes him unique and also dispels the myths and stereotypes of autism that claim autistic people is dependent. Moreover, he is also unique in his way of thinking. He has a logical and well-ordered way of thinking even though, as stated by Semino (2014), the way Christopher talks reflects his age and limitation in terms of grammar and vocabulary. It is not normal for a kid at his age to think in a very logical and well-ordered way, however, that is what makes him unique and different.

CONCLUSIONS

Christopher Boone, the autistic character, is portrayed through his narration and action as an autistic child who has tendency to avoid social contact with others, independent, affectionate and has special talent and savant skill. Besides, the characterizations of autistic character in the novel also have some sort of relationship with the myths of autism. It is evident that four characterizations of Christopher Boone confirm three myths of autism and negate four of

them. These findings answer the research question regarding how the novel portrays the autistic character in relation to the characterization and myths of autism. Thus, It can be concluded that current literary works, especially *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003), still rely on the myths of autism that are formed by society to portray an autistic character. However, it is possible for different works to have different way to portray their autistic characters.

To obtain more in-depth understanding and the latest findings of characterization of autistic character in literary works and its relation to myths of autism, future studies are needed. The future studies could be using more recent literary works to find out how the particular works react towards the myths of autism in characterizing its autistic character since the latest study. Moreover, it is possible for future studies to analyze whether there are other tools to determine the portrayal of

autistic character in literary works besides the myths of autism.

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