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The Stigmatization of Autism

The stigma surrounding those with disabilities, specifically autism, is an ever-present social issue in today's society. Although outsiders may not see the effects of stigma surrounding families with children with autism, societal stigmatization consequences pervade the everyday life of those affected. Human nature elementally marks people as different if they do not match their own identity, promoting stereotypes about those with disabilities. Ableism is discrimination or prejudice against those with disabilities and has affected how society views and treats those with these afflictions. Discrimination against those who are disabled is an all-pervading issue within our society; not only does it affect those with autism but also their families as well.

My brother Benjamin was diagnosed with autism at two years old, which was the last time my parents heard him speak. Since then, he has battled with his lack of motor skills, communication, sensory issues, and cognitive defects. When we were little, I did not view him as a person with autism. As I grew up, I started to notice the effects of his disorder. Autism in the Hamelin household came before anything else. Growing up alongside my brother means that for the past 19 years, my life has been challenged every day by enduring and watching the struggles my brother and my family face because of autism. I never realized the significant impact autism has had on my brother and family until I reached my final years of high school.

In the Hamelin household, going out to eat was something that my family has always struggled with. We would usually get takeout and eat at home but decided not to this one time.

habitual stims, which include the following: rocking back and forth, stomping, yelling, and flapping his hands excitedly. Stimming is a repetitive and irregular involuntary movement those with autism commonly have. The movements help soothe and reduce anxiety in overstimulated situations or environments and are more present when Benjamin feels overwhelmed or excited. In this case, he was excited to eat his favorite foods. As a family, we usually arrive at the restaurant around 5:30 p.m. to beat the crowds, but we did not this one time. We are regulars, and the owners know of Benjamin and his condition and sat us in a booth in a relatively quiet area. Unfortunately, a family was then seated behind Benjamin. He started to rock back and forth, shaking the backrest of the booth.

My brother and I went to the same high school. At lunchtime, some of the special needs students would eat in the cafeteria as part of their inclusion exposure. The special needs teachers would accompany their students to assure their well-being. Many of them had visible disabilities such as using noise-canceling headphones, facial features, stimming, and involuntary movements. These students would usually sit together at a lunch table farther away from the typical students who would make harassing remarks, calling my brother and his classmates names such as, “retarded,” “idiots,” and “crippled.”

Erving Goffman presents the notion that all humans are to act based on behavioral societal standards which is the foundation of the concept of stigma. Stigma is the disapproval of others based on their social attributes or mannerisms that serve as a distinction from others. For example, someone with autism is seen as incapacitated and incapable of having a focused conversation if they have stims that are distracting to the interaction. There are many stereotypes that society identifies with disabilities, resulting in discrimination. Discrimination is maintained

contrasting attributes to be normalized in society, promoting stigma. The institution that people grow up in can contribute to the stigma surrounding disabilities and their families if their performance is not validated and accepted. Families may experience stigma even though they do not directly share the stigma of the afflicted individual. Although families do not immediately experience the stigma of the afflicted individual, they are aware of the individual's ailments and can provide empathy and understanding. If they are exposed to an institution where stigmatized behaviors are accepted, those with disabilities and their families would not have to deal with ableism and discrimination.

Goffman explains why those with disabilities are judged based on their behaviors and characteristics they present through the presentation of self, performances a human pursues in the presence of others. The portrayal of normal functioning must meet the normative behavior of societal beliefs. The idea that a person's role in society is validated only if their behavior satisfies the societal belief system can create alienation within a community. The only way for those with disabilities to gain acceptance is for them and their families to recognize that they face ableism and discrimination and to unite and stand up against this discriminative behavior. This is not achievable unless those affected by disabilities and their families counteract prejudicial actions. While many families are affected by these afflictions, the performance of the self is a result of societal belief systems.

From the experiences I had with my brother growing up, my family and I often feel stigmatized when we go in public with Benjamin because of his atypical characteristics and behaviors. Restaurants are one of the difficult encounters for our family. We go early to avoid busy restaurant times and to avoid the stigma by having to correct his behavior and put on a

behaving in a socially acceptable way just because he does not have any visible disabilities. Once Benjamin starts to stim, people realize that he does not fit the well-behaved and undistruptive role. Benjamin does not pursue a performance in the presence of others because of his lack of cognitive ability; he behaves at his own will. The family behind Benjamin's side of the booth reacted to his stims and said, "Could you please stop shaking the booth and yelling?" Another family stared at us because of the interaction with the other family. The other families that are a part of the performance make Benjamin's role appear not credible by pointing out his abnormal behavior and labeling his stims as socially unacceptable, trying to get my family to correct them. The families' responsive behavior was to attempt to make Benjamin fit the standards of conventional behavior in our society. The actions presented by the families in the restaurant exemplify how people perceive those who do not fit the standard social behaviors and maintain the negative stereotypes associated with disabilities. If society were more sympathetic and accepting of those with disabilities, it would reduce the stigma around those with special needs and ultimately alleviate the stress on those with disabilities and their families.

The environment at school is an example of discrimination and stigmatization. The seclusion of the special needs students in the cafeteria is an act of discrimination. The teachers argue that the separation of lunch tables made my brother and his peers "easier to handle" and "less work" while still in the same room as their typical peers. Their ableist behavior perpetuates the stigma that those with autism struggle with peer interaction and social settings. The teachers' actions are a byproduct of stigma. Those with special needs require equal educational and social opportunities as their typical student peers, even if they do not present the same behavior as their typical peers. The teachers claimed it was "easier for them to handle," when in reality, their

work on socialization.

Many of my brother's classmates had stimming behaviors and other visible disabilities. The harassment stems from the autistic students not fitting the performance of ordinary high schoolers. The typical students were trying to validate their roles by their ableist slurs toward special needs students. The special needs teachers did not do anything about the verbal harassment, allowing the discrimination to continue. My brother was one of the harassed. I was one of the only people who told the harassers to stop their discriminatory and verbally alienating behavior toward these students. I was then harassed for advocating for my brother's and his peers' role to appear credible. My role in the performance of a typical high schooler became unbelievable since I did not conform to their ableist behavior. The antagonistic behavior by the observers sustains the stigma and discrimination of those with disabilities. If the other students were sympathetic towards my brother and his peers, it would diminish the stigma around autism and relieve the distress of those with disabilities and their families.

Goffman's concept of stigma and the performance of self provides context and validates what many families with loved ones with a disability endure daily. I saw how the corrective behavior of the families in the restaurant and students in the cafeteria contribute to the effects that stigma has on those with disabilities and their families. Societal standards are damaging to those who are incapable of meeting societal expectations as they conform to the performance. My parents and I struggle with Benjamin every day, trying to ensure that we, as a family, do not have to continue to face the discrimination and stigmatization that we still experience. Recognizing differences in behavior can be advantageous in providing initiatives to change

provide compassion and sympathy towards those with differences.