

The Genius Painter and Other Stories: A Children Picture Book about Stigma of Autistic Children

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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses stigma that harms autistic children that can harm the mental health of autistic children. Using children's picture books as the medium and realistic fiction as the genre, this creative work shows how autistic children's mental health is harmed by stigma and how autistic children cope with the stigma. The stories incorporated stigma theory which explains how the stigma affects the main characters' self-confidence and self-concept. Coping mechanisms of camouflaging, disclosing, and reframing are used for the main characters to cope against the stigma toward them. Other than coping mechanisms, autistic children can get support from other people who are also against the stigma of autistic people.

Keywords: Stigma; Autistic Children; Coping Mechanism; Children Picture Books; Realistic Fiction

INTRODUCTION

According to Wayne Fleisig (2018), a clinical psychologist, "[b]ooks can be a good and non-threatening platform in which to discuss difficult subjects" (as cited in Roberts, 2018). Children's picture books can also be a good medium for parents to educate their children about certain topics. Books on sensitive topics are also useful for children who are not (yet) coping with difficult situations. On an individual level, Lewison asserts that reading such literature promotes understanding and empathy with others, as children "make personal connections to characters that are different from themselves and events that are different from those in their lives" (Bowen & Schutt, 2007, p. 5).

The decision to make this creative work is because of the low reading ability in Indonesia. According to Kemendagri, Indonesia is still low in literacy. Indonesia ranked 62 among 70 countries (Utami, 2021). From dpr.go.id, "Around 2012-2015, Indonesia's reading score in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) only went up by one point from 396 to 397" (Utami, 2021). A picture book is a good medium to address heavy topics because picture books are good to give a well-defined meaning of a story with a limited word count in order to make it easy to understand. Examples of heavy topics in picture books are family issues, specifically about adoptive family members in a picture book titled "*You're Not My Real Mother!*" by Molly Friedrich, Illustrated by Christy Hale 2004, War and violence issues in picture book titled "*Fireboat: The heroic adventures of the John J. Harvey*" by Maria Kalman 2002, and racial & cultural issues in picture book titled "*A sweet smell of roses*" by Angela Johnson Illustrated by Eric Velasquez 2005. While it helps children read, picture books also emphasize parents' and children's interaction (Strouse, Nyhout, & Ganea, 2018, p. 10). Not only helps children to have fun reading, children's reading experience with their parents can help to develop a stronger bond between them.

The topic addressed in this creative work is about the stigma of autistic children. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a set of neurodevelopmental disorders characterized by a

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lack of social interaction and verbal and nonverbal communication in the first three years of life. According to Hye Ran Park, a doctor specializing in neurosurgery (2016), "the distinctive social behaviors include an avoidance of eye contact, problems with emotional control or understanding the emotions of others, and a markedly restricted range of activities and interests" (p.1). Not understanding their behavior-made people give stigma to autistic people that they are weird and troublesome to other people.

Autistic children are still receiving many kinds of stigma. For example, autistic children are lacking in empathy, or autistic children cannot live independently. For that reason, children with autism are considered burdens for the parents and the family. That stigma of autistic children created another stigma for them, such as they are an embarrassment to the family. The stigma of autism in Indonesia makes most Indonesian people discriminate against people with autism. According to republika.co.id, in Indonesia, there is no specific survey about the increasing number of autistic children in Indonesia, but some professionals reported that in the last five years, the number of autistic children in Indonesia has been increasing really fast (Muhammad Hafil, 2021). The lack of information and surveys about autistic children in Indonesia is proof that made Indonesian people still not understand children with autism and the autism discrimination happens around them.

Sometimes people think that autistic people are naïve, so some people can take advantage of the autistic people's talent but do not give proper feedback or credit to the autistic people. In Indonesia, there are still so many stigmas about autistic children. Mostly in Indonesia, autistic children are considered weird because of the way autistic children talk or express themselves or considered weird because of the different physical movements or appearances of autistic children. For example, recently on Twitter some Indonesia's netizens joked about an autistic athlete named Dewangga. Even though Dewangga won two medallions in ASEAN Autism Games 2018 for Indonesia, some netizens made fun of him because of the unique way Dewangga talked during the interview. In the tweet started by a user named [@tvindonesiawkwk](https://twitter.com/tvindonesiawkwk) uploaded a picture of Dewangga, the replies are about netizens who defend Dewangga said it is improper to joke about people with ASD but the people who joked about it replied that it was only a joke and no need to worry (Muklis, 2022). This judgment and stigma of autistic people are giving disadvantages to Dewangga and the other autistic people in Indonesia in their daily lives because no matter how good deeds they do, society still does not appreciate them because of their conditions.

The effect of the stigma created by adults about autism that is passed down to the younger children made non-autistic children misjudge the autistic people and discriminate against the autistic children. Moreover, the bullying toward autistic children was judged as a joke and not a serious problem. Melly Budiman, the head of Yayasan Autis Indonesia, said autistic children often get bullied in school. There was a case where one autistic child in one senior high school in Jakarta was harassed by three of his classmates. This incident made the autistic kid traumatized and did not want to go to school anymore (Endro, 2016).

Children's picture books are usually targeted to children around two to ten years old (Bowman, 2019). This creative work is targeted for children around six to ten years old because around this age, they are very eager to learn. According to scholastic.com (2019), children around this age love to learn, eager to please, and have a good attention span and extended conversation with shifting topics. For these reasons, they can learn about autistic children without being judgemental and easily stigmatizing autistic people.

This creative work will use realistic fiction as the genre. Realistic fiction can be defined as a genre of writing in which the characters, setting, and events are made up but *could* be real (Emily Polson, 2018). Since the topic is about autism in Indonesia, this creative work will use

this genre to make the reader easily relate the story to the reality that happened about autistic children's conditions in Indonesia nowadays.

This creative work is about understanding how stigma can hurt autistic children and how autistic children manage to deal with the stigma. To be more specific, it is about how the main characters' mental health are harmed and how the main characters cope with the stigma and the resulting discriminations. This creative work is also intended to show the effect of the stigma and how autistic people cope with it. To be more specific it is about the stigma harms the main characters' mental health by damaging their self-confidence and self-concept, also about the main characters cope with the stigma by concealing/camouflaging, disclosing, reframing the term of 'autism' in a positive way, and getting help from other people.

For the theoretical framework, this creative work will use stigma theory by Erving Goffman. The stigma theory will be used for creating the plot of the story. According to Kleinman & Rachel (2009), Goffman views stigma as "a process based on the social construction of identity" (p. 2). Stigma is a social phenomenon that happens in social relationships when certain traits are seen as deviant from society. According to LibreTexts (2021), "[g]iven that stigmas arise from social relationships, the theory places emphasis, not on the existence of deviant traits, but on the perception and marking of certain traits as deviant by a second party" (p. 4). Someone's social status condition changed from 'normal' to 'discredited' or 'discreditable' after being stigmatized.

As cited in Arthur & Rachel (2009), Goffman's original discussion of stigma includes psychological and social elements, and these ideas were used in the analysis of the psychological impact of someone who is stigmatized. This has created an understanding of the psychology of the stigmatized, focusing on the processes by which stigma is internalized and shapes individual behavior (Arthur Kleinman & Rachel Hall-Clifford, 2009).

Goffman's stigma theories are then used by other researchers to develop more studies about stigma. Now stigma is developed into three main types, which are social stigma, self-stigma, and health professional or institutional stigma. These explanations of stigma types also provide an explanation of how the stigma can affect mental health.

Social stigma is structural in society and can create barriers for persons with a mental or behavioral disorder. Structural means that stigma is a belief held by a large fraction of society in which persons with the stigmatized condition are not equal to the normal people or are part of an inferior group. In this context, stigma is embedded in the social framework to create inferiority (Ahmedani, 2011). According to Crocker & Quinn (2002), "collective representations of meanings in society about values, beliefs, and ideologies can construct social stigma" (as cited in Ahmedani, 2011). According to Corrigan, Markowitz, and Watson (2004), historical, political, and economic factors are included in this corrective representation (as cited in Ahmedani, 2001). For example, people, in general, think that autistic children are socially inept, or people, in general, think that it is better to stay away from autistic people.

According to Crocker(1999), stigma can be internalized by people with a certain condition (as cited in Ahmedani, 2011). Continuation of social stigma can influence the stigmatized person to feel guilty and lose confidence in his or her condition (Corrigan, 2004, as cited in Ahmedani, 2011). Thus, in self-stigma, the knowledge that stigma is present within society, can have an impact on an individual even if that person has not been directly stigmatized. This impact can have a deleterious effect on a person's self-esteem and self-efficacy, which may lead to an altered behavioral presentation (Corrigan, 2007, as cited in Ahmedani 2011). Personal self-esteem may or may not be affected by stigma depending on individual coping mechanisms (Crocker & Major, 1989, as cited in Ahmedani 2011).

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In general, self-confidence is also defined as self-esteem. According to Erol and Orth (2011), Self-esteem is an emotion-based assessment of one's self-worth or value (as cited in Greenacre et al, 20011). Self-esteem is also a part of self-concept. According to humanist psychologist Carl Rogers (1959), self-concept is made up of three parts which are ideal self, self-image, and self-esteem (as cited in VerywellMind.com, 2022). Ideal self is about how the individual wants to be. This individual has the attributes or qualities that his/ her is working on or wants to possess. Self-image is about how an individual sees him/ herself at this moment in time, usually including physical appearance, personality, and social roles. According to HealthDay News (2018), social stigma plays a large role in depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues which are experienced by many autistic people. British researchers found that 72% of the psychological distress reported in 111 adults with autism was linked to social stigma. As for self-stigma, it happens to give impact to the stigmatized person through how the stigmatized person receives the social stigma and beliefs about how the society judges, then the stigmatized person starts to think about him or herself according to how the social stigma describes him or her. The survey questions touched on six areas of stress, including victimization and discrimination; "outness," meaning how often those with autism disclose their condition to others; everyday discrimination; expectation of rejection; physical concealment of their condition; and internalized stigma. The results indicated that social stress due to stigma also predicted lower levels of emotional, psychological and social well-being in people with autism (Maureen Salamon, 2018).

Autistic people often experience stigma, which refers to negative attitudes and treatment from others. Because of that, some autistic people also have negative beliefs about themselves, which may affect their self-worth and mental health (Han, et al. 2021). According to Ling, Mak and Cheng (2010), The behaviors exhibited by children with autism that are either inappropriate or violate social norms are therefore often seen as being forms of disobedience rather than symptoms of their disorder (as cited in Alex, 2018).

Some of the stigmas that are found by researchers are the stigma of dehumanizing autistic people as cited in Botha (2020), autistic people are economic burdens, incapable of having moral selves, selfish and egocentric, having integrity equivalent to non-human animals (Botha et al, 2020, pp. 2-3). Autistic children also referred as people who "exhibit less marked domesticated traits at the morphological, physiological, and behavioral levels" (Benitez-Burraco, Lattanzi, and Murphy 2016 p.1) which may be interpreted as autistic people being less domesticated than non-autistic individuals. Public members who are uneducated on the nature of the disorder may act particularly hostile or stigmatizing toward people with autism. The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) defines a person with a disability as "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities" (adata.org). According to Green (2003), "[i]ndividuals with disabilities are commonly viewed as the bearers of negative traits and, therefore, as burdens" (As cited in Alex, 2018). Because disabling conditions, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, evoke negative or punitive responses in people, they can be considered stigmatizing (Gray, 1993 as cited in Alex, 2018). This may stem from the notion that the actions of those with autism are done by choice and therefore preventable when in actuality, they are symptoms of the disorder.

Other than stigma theory, this creative work will use a coping mechanism concept for creating the characters of the stories. There are four ways for autistic people to cope with the stigma which are concealment/ camouflaging, disclosure, positive reframing and getting help from other people. Concealment refers to withholding one's autistic status to avoid the stigma associated with the label of autism while camouflaging refers to masking one's autistic traits to avoid the stigma associated with such behaviors (Han et al, 2022). According to Han et al

(2022), Behaviors of camouflaging in autistic person “involved controlling their behavior, mirroring neurotypical behavior, putting on different personas in different social situations, or even using alcohol to help them become more sociable” (Han et al, 2022, p.18).

In Botha et al. (2020), some autistic adults from different countries described disclosing to directly challenge stigmatizing comments made by others: "I will sometimes just say, 'I was diagnosed with Asperger's when I was younger, and I don't think you should be saying something like that'" (p. 14-15). Similarly, several autistic adults from Israel (Schneid & Raz, 2020) and the US (Lee et al., 2021) chose to fight stigma and advocate for themselves by telling neurotypical individuals to respect the way they communicate: “If, until now, I said to people that I am a person who enjoys being alone and they called me a loner, now I just say, no, I'm an autist, and I enjoy this very autistic communication” (Schneid & Raz, 2020, p. 5).

Those who reframed autism as a positive part of their social identity (i.e. a social group they belonged to) emphasized how the autistic community provided them with a sense of belonging to help them negotiate feelings of alienation and isolation from society (Han et al, 2022). In Botha et al. (2020), all 20 autistic adults from different parts of the world described autism as a central and integral part of their identity. They used identity-first language (‘autistic person’) rather than person-first language (‘person with autism’) to reclaim the stigmatized label of autism and de-stigmatize it by reinforcing that autism cannot and does not need to be separated from the individual.

People who do not believe or follow the stigma against autistic children can give support for autistic children. Social support has a big impact for autistic children especially if it comes from the closest person around the autistic children. According to Thoits (1995), “Social support is commonly conceptualized as the social resources on which an individual can rely when dealing with life problems and stressors” (as cited in Kort, 2018). Defined by Dumont and Provost (1999, 345) as, “multidimensional concept that includes the support actually received (informative, emotional and instrumental) and the sources of the support (friends, family, strangers)” (as cited in Humphrey, 2010). According to Sandra et al (1989), social support has long been recognized as an important resource that protects children from the negative effects of life stressors (as cited in Humphrey, 2010). It is proposed that social support acts as a buffer that offsets the impact of stress on well-being (Dumont and Provost, 1999 as cited in Humphrey, 2010).

According to Scott (2020), social support is categorized into four types which are emotional support, esteem support, tangible support, and informational support. This creative work will use emotional support and esteem support in my creative work. Emotional support involves physical contacts such as hugging or pat on the back, listening, and empathizing (Scott, 2020). Esteem support is an expression of confidence and encouragement (Scott, 2020).

CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme of this creative work is autistic people should be appreciated and not be harmed and not discriminated against by society. In my stories, the protagonists will show the outcome after being stigmatized and also the process of how they try to cope and prove that the stigma about autistic children is wrong.

Plot

Here are the plots of the five stories

No Longer Nuisance!

Kiana is an Autistic child. She cannot focus on one specific thing for a long period. Her parents believe Kiana is a smart kid in learning languages, but they are afraid that Kiana cannot help herself in other aspects, so her parents decide to hire a caregiver for Kiana to supervise her every day. Kiana, with her low focus eventually feels burdened by the scolding of her parents and her caregiver. Sometimes her caregiver says hurtful words about her Autistic condition. She is told that she is smart but useless and an unsociable kid by her caregiver. With the nagging by her parents and caregiver, Kiana's self-confidence gradually decreases, and she believes that what her parents and her caregiver say about her is true. Kiana then decides to observe and imitate how her classmates play or speak. However, after Kiana tries to camouflage and imitate her friends, she is still dissatisfied. Due to pretending that she is the same as her friends, she feels like she cannot express herself freely. Finally, she decides to brace herself and talk to her teacher Ms Runa about her condition. Ms Runa does not directly help her, instead, Ms Runa teaches Kiana to be more confident even though she is autistic. She also teaches Kiana to take the initiative so Kiana is not seen as someone useless anymore.

One Word at a Time

Icha is a new kid around the neighborhood. She has difficulties communicating with children around her age because of her autistic traits. She cannot muster up a good sentence and speak properly. This condition made her friends think that she is dumb, and Icha loses her confidence in trying to socialize. One of her friends decides to play tricks on Icha. She teaches Icha to do some weird stuff but she tells Icha that is how she should behave. However, others see her way more annoying than usual. Icha gradually lost interest in making friends because she is not confident anymore after hearing what others say about her. She starts to believe that it is better if she is alone and does not have friends. One day Icha finds someone sitting alone on the bench where she usually sits. Icha decides to sit and pay no attention because she is afraid she might bother the girl. Surprisingly, the girl comes closer to Icha and asks Icha to be her friend. Icha decides to disclose her condition to her friend and forces her to go away because it is better if she does not meddle with her. Icha believes that everyone around her will be in trouble. Icha is surprised because this girl does not do what exactly she is told, but instead, she follows Icha and tries to be friends with her. Icha is gradually gaining her self-confidence once more, and now she is not afraid of trying to make friends anymore.

The Genius Painter

Haikal is a good kid but he is socially awkward after the incident the first week he tried to play with his friends. At first his friend took interest in him about his paintings but because of his autistic condition he cannot comprehend his friend's intention. When he decided to teach his friend about how he draws, he became too focused on his own work and leaving his classmates unable to progress further. His classmates got bored then left him alone. Even worse, one of his classmates named Kino made the situation worse by annoying Haikal the next day by bringing up that incident and it went on for several weeks. After being bullied by Kino and his classmates, Haikal lost his confidence and decided to hide himself during the school lunch break. One day one of the kids decided to help Haikal by giving an idea to use his painting skills on other stuff other than paper. Haikal decides to try it. He tries to develop his painting into something different and still useful. One day Kino makes a mess, and Haikal has just finished developing his new paintings, and it turns out his hobby can clear up the mess that Kino makes. Finally, Haikal's classmates come back to play with Haikal again without getting bored, and Haikal is happy because his hobby can be useful.

Don't Care, I Just Did It My Way

Geana loves to see her father repairing or making machines in her dad's workshop. One day at her school, her teacher Ms Aruna is giving a science group assignment project to make a simple machine that can regenerate small lamps. Ms Aruna sees Geana's potential so she decides to let Geana do anything related to the project. Geana is too excited and ends up not discussing anything with her group. She comes up with three prototypes of her own liking. Her friends argue with her because the prototypes are weird and not following the guidebook. Her friends start to insult her and call her weird. Geana at first is stunned to hear that, she overthinks and tries to find what makes her friends insult her. Her constant overthinking behavior causes her distress and becomes socially awkward around her friends for the next few weeks. She felt hopeless when the final came and she thought her score would be bad. Ms Aruna tries to calm her down, and she gains back her confidence and says, "Well see? The teacher said my machine works, 'I think I am a weird genius and I love myself".

My Brilliant Doodle!

Raymond has been a shy kid since he was young, his autistic condition makes his parents give high expectations too. His parents occasionally say that he is special but why he cannot be as smart as his brother and this makes Raymond lose his confidence. He tries to study harder but he still cannot progress further in his academic study. His brother tried to pursue him in his hobby by providing new drawing tools if his parents took it away. One day Raymond saw how Regan studied and decided to imitate how Regan took notes, after imitating the note writing Raymond improvises his own note into his liking and finally Raymond can study the way he likes and improve his score.

Characters

No Longer Nuisance!

Main character: Kiana's autistic traits are about how hard for her to focus on doing one specific thing made her mess things up. Kiana is a six years old short girl with a shy personality.

Side characters:

Kiana's caregiver – Mago. The antagonist of the story, instead of being a good caregiver Mago is the one who gives negative remarks about Kiana and humiliates Kiana.

Kiana's Teacher - Runa

Supporting character, helping Kiana to overcome the stigma. Also helps Kiana in gaining her confidence back no matter how weird her classmates think about her.

One Word at a Time

Main character: Icha is an eight years old kid, her autistic trait is speech delay in daily conversation so she cannot catch up talking with her friends in a quick time and she cannot muster up good sentences to answer. She is pretty shy and observant.

Side character: Icha's new friend – Rania. Icha's new neighbor helps Icha even when Icha throws tantrums she still likes to help Icha muster up words.

The Genius Painter

Main character: Haikal is a ten years old boy. Haikal's autistic trait is how he became too focused on one specific thing that he likes that made him forget about anything and made the people around him think that he is an unsociable kid.

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Side character: Haikal's bully – Kino. Kino is Haikal's classmate, everyone knows him for being super bossy and loves to mess around. He is manipulative and likes bullying Haikal by spreading bad rumors about Haikal around the school.

Don't Care, I Just Did It My Way

Main character: Geana autistic traits are about her hyperactivity that made her become too curious and start trying random things that made people around her annoyed. Geana is seven years old, her appearance is a bit disheveled since she loves to move around.

Side character: Geana's teacher – Aruna. Has a humble heart and is observant to understand what Geana needs. Teaches Geana with patience and gives good advice so Geana can satisfy her curiosity without making a ruckus toward other people.

My Brilliant Doodle!

Main character: Raymond is eight years old. His autistic condition is he is really slow at learning academic courses such as math, science, etc. But he really loves painting.

Side Character: Raymond's twin brother – Regan. Different from Raymond, Regan is smart academically, but he loves to help Raymond to gain Raymond's confidence back. He also supports Raymond in pursuing Raymond's favorite hobby.

Conflicts

This creative work will use internal and external conflict. First, Internal conflict also known as Man vs. Self “involves a character experiencing conflict within his or her own mind” (Thompson, 2018). For the internal conflict in this creative work, the autistic character will struggle by conflicting with their own mind that is already giving up and living according to the stigma they had.

Second, according to Thompson (2018), External conflict “[w]ill most often play out between a protagonist and his or her antagonist, although it can also appear between friends or acquaintances”. External conflict is a type of conflict that places characters at odds with forces outside themselves. External conflicts are divided into three which are character vs character, character vs society, and character vs nature. This creative work will use two external conflicts which are characters vs characters and characters vs society. In the character vs character, the autistic protagonists will face the villain characters to reach their goal by using their autistic traits. For the character vs society, this will be shown generally in the story about how the society judging and bullying and giving the stigma about the autistic protagonists around in their environment.

CONCLUSION

This creative work is purposely to discuss the topic of stigma and discrimination against autistic children, with the aim of showing how autistic children's mental health is affected and how autistic children cope with the stigma and discrimination toward them. First autistic children's mental health is at risk because of the stigma. Autistic children became socially inept because they were seen as ‘unfitting with society’. The stigma made autistic children become scared and lose their self-confidence, self-concept, and self-image. In this creative work the main characters are all autistic children and how society treated them made them lose their confidence and ended up not respecting their own self.

Second of all, because of their autistic traits and how autistic acts to suppress their stress. Autistic children try to cope with it first by camouflaging then following the behavior of non-autistic people. Therefore, this coping mechanism cannot bring a positive outcome in the long run. Camouflaging or imitating makes the autistic children become more stressed because they cannot express their true selves, and they have to act or imitate something that they do not usually do. In the first story, the main character named Kiana decided to follow how her non-autistic friend behaves and acts and it made her feel uncomfortable. Eventually she decided to distance herself with her friends.

Some autistic children eventually will seek help either by disclosing their identity to their closest person or whoever will accept them without judging their autistic traits. After the autistic children succeed in disclosing their autistic condition, they will try to reframe the term 'autistic' in a positive way in their own way. Non-autistic people might see autistic children's behavior as unusual, but in the long run, they will get used to it and not stigmatize and discriminate against them anymore. In the second until the last stories the main characters are using disclosing and positive reframe for their coping strategy. The outcome of both strategies are good enough because the main characters can gain their confidence back and even receive support from the people around them.

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