

Animating Neurodiversity: The Impact of Disney-Pixar's Dory in Understanding Cognitive Differences

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As children, we hardly stop to think about the complexity hiding behind the brightness of our beloved animated characters. From anxiety to different compulsive disorders and neurodiverse conditions, the entertainment industry (or media only) has made subtle representations of cognitive challenges. Growing up, you probably heard, "Hi, my name is Dory, and I suffer from short-term memory loss" while watching a Disney classic. *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Finding Dory* (2016) are crucial films for portraying neurodiverse characters in family-targeted mass media.

Short-term memory loss is when individuals present difficulty recalling information or events that have occurred recently – typically within seconds or minutes (Stern & Brickman, 2008). This condition falls under the neurodiverse spectrum, a term referring to cognitive variations encompassing diverse ways neurological processes function and affect daily life. Neurodiversity is an umbrella term that describes how human brains differ in cognitive processes, recognizing that differences are naturally predisposed and not a result of illness (Armstrong, 2015). Bearing this in mind, the worldwide famous character from the Disney classic *Finding Nemo* (2003), Dory, is considered a neurodivergent blue tang fish.

The depiction of neurodiversity and brain health in entertainment mainstream media has slowly improved through Disney films. Through characters such as the classic Disney Princess Snow White, whose meticulous behavior resembles individuals with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder; Princess Elsa from Disney's "Frozen" who exhibits traits related to Major Depressive Disorder; Piglet from the timeless "Winnie the Pooh" who personified anxiety; Disney-Pixar was able to subtly bring up the subject of mental health while promoting understanding and empathy in a way that is accessible to both kids and adults (Yager, 2024).

While Dory on *Finding Nemo* (2003) is a key milestone in the portrayal of neurodiversity in mass media, it is also a stereotype-heavy representation. The original intention was not to showcase neurodiversity, but rather use it as a comic relief device, contributing to the film's success. The movie director, Andrew Stanton, mentioned before how hearing about the myth of golden fish and their 5-second memory was the inspiration behind Dory (Heady, 2016). Hence, Disney-Pixar fell victim to two specific neurodivergence stereotypes: the mad genius with a unique talent and the unstable individual struggling with mental illness. Dory, a fish that can read, and Marlin (Nemo's father) come across a diver's mask. While inspecting it, Dory reads the words written on the side of the mask. Simultaneously, Dory is portrayed as unstable and struggling with mental illness – shown to be impulsive and incautious when she decides to play with the jellyfish despite Marlin's warnings (Rohr, 2014). Also, throughout the film, Dory often apologizes for her short-term memory loss, and by constantly saying sorry, she is playing the role of the weaker individual, letting her condition negatively define her.

Nonetheless, Dory's significance lies in the way she evolved from being the comedy sidekick in *Finding Nemo* (2003) to the primary character in *Finding Dory* (2016). In the more recent movie, characters are more supportive of Dory and see beyond the things she cannot do, reinforcing a more positive view of herself. However, it is important to note how this behavior mainly comes from characters with some limitations, like the Beluga Whale, which struggles with echolocation, the octopus, which has anxiety, and the whale shark, which has visual impairment. Despite this, *Finding Dory* (2016) sends a powerful message on how neurodivergent individuals are more than the labels society assigns to them.

Finally, many negative reviews claim Dory's potential was wast-

ed in the most recent film. The belief that Dory should have stayed as a comedy relief character reflects the importance of having more neurodivergent protagonists in Disney-caliber films (Person et al., 2021). Visibility should not be masked with comedy, but rather abolish the stigma developed around cognitive-related conditions through mainstream media and ultimately allow all people to understand and normalize neurodiversity.

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