“IT REVEALS WHO I REALLY AM”:
NEW METAPHORS, SYMBOLS, AND MOTIFS IN REPRESENTATIONS OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS IN POPULAR CULTURE

By

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English

Middle Tennessee State University
2013

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There simply is not enough thanks to thank my family, my faithful parents, T. Brian and Pamela O'Neal, and my understanding sisters, Auburn and Taffeta, for their lifelong support; without their love, belief in my strengths, patience with my struggles, and encouragement, I would not be in this position today. I am forever grateful to my wonderful director, Dr. Angela Hague, whose commitment to this project went above and beyond what I deserved to expect. To the rest of my committee, Dr. David Lavery and Dr. Robert Petersen, for their seasoned advice and willingness to participate, I am also indebted. Beyond these, I would like to recognize some "unofficial" members of my committee, including Dr. Elyce Helford, Dr. Alicia Broderick, Ari Ne'eman, Chris Foss, and Melanie Yergau, who graciously offered me necessary guidance and insightful advice for this project, particularly in the field of Disability Studies. Yet most of all, Ephesians 3.20-21.

ABSTRACT

Autism has been sensationalized by the media because of the disorder's purported prevalence: Diagnoses of this condition that was traditionally considered to be quite rare have radically increased in recent years, and an analogous fascination with autism has emerged in the field of popular culture. In the past decade, numerous television programs and independent and foreign films have focused on autism spectrum disorders by presenting principal characters with recognizable traits of Asperger's Syndrome and other forms of autism. Many of these programs promote similar ideas and stereotypes about autism and convey metaphors, motifs, symbols, and themes that describe the autistic experience. This study focuses on the films *Adam, Mozart and the Whale, My Name is Khan, Ocean Heaven,* and *Temple Grandin* and analyzes characters from the television shows *Alphas, The Big Bang Theory, Bones, Boston Legal, Community, Criminal Minds, House, Law and Order: Criminal Intent, Monk, Parenthood,* and *Sherlock.* First, this discussion explores the significant use of masquerade in these works to convey autism identity. Second, it analyzes the recurring use of detective motifs and conventions in portrayals of autistic persons. Third, it evaluates three ubiquitous qualities, honesty, innocence, and violence, that are not part of the official diagnosis for autism but continue to appear in these narratives, suggests what such repeated themes say about autistic people, and offers alternative interpretations of how these presentations could be read. Finally, it descibes the types of relationships portrayed in these popular culture

constructions and their related metaphors, making use of research in psychology to explain their potential meanings.

This study is significant because the current depictions and messages in both the media and popular culture regarding autism do those in the autism community a disservice. Such metaphors frequently suggest that autism is a mystery, a burden, even a kind of curse. According to various theories in disability studies, such messages prevent autistic people from claiming their disability as part of their identity. Most current messages in the media are based on the medical model, which focuses on the debilitating symptoms of a disability and therefore categorizes it as a problem. The characters and narratives examined here, however, break this model, and this study instead pursues the social model, one which focuses more on the particular needs and attributes of the individual. The result is a discussion of narratives, themes, and characters in popular culture that reveals the complex realities of autistic identity and the potential for its beneficial integration into society.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: "You Ignored Me—That Was a Mistake"

It could be argued that autism advocacy, in the first decade of the 2000s, began with a metaphor. On February 25, 2005 on NBC's *Today Show* as part of a week-long series entitled "Autism: The Hidden Epidemic," then chairman of NBC Bob Wright was interviewed by Matt Lauer about Wright's autistic grandson and the difficulty his family had encountered in trying to glean more information about autism from professionals. Because of this, Wright announced that he was starting a new advocacy group in order to spread autism awareness. At the conclusion of the interview, Wright handed Lauer a lapel pin shaped like a blue jigsaw puzzle piece, the logo of Wright's new group: Autism Speaks. Since then, the puzzle piece has been synonymous with autism; not only this signature blue-edge piece but multicolored puzzle pieces fitting together decorate ribbons and jewelry allocated for autism awareness. Displaying these decorations signals that one is concerned about issues surrounding autism and is doing all he or she can to make the world better by supporting Autism Speaks and similar organizations.

Yet, the puzzle piece says more. This is a metaphor comparing autism to something else, a puzzle. What does it mean? In their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson point out that puzzle metaphors are common, used to represent "problems . . . for which, typically, there is a correct solution—and once solved, they are solved forever" (144-45). In using a puzzle piece, Autism Speaks

defines autism as nothing more than a problem or an excessive mystery, something meant to be fixed according to their group's prescribed way, an enigma that has a definite solution, an eliminating cure. Autism Speaks readily admits that the solution to autism as of yet is unknown, but this organization is determined to find the solution quickly so that the puzzle can forever be resolved.

However, viewing autism in such a way is disturbing and problematic. Yes, this perspective of viewing autism as a puzzle recognizes certain difficulties associated with autism, but just as a single piece is only part of a large jigsaw puzzle, difficulty is only a part of the overall intricate and complex nature of autism. Autism Speaks has a tendency to view only the negative aspects of autism, yet it fails to take into account positive dimensions of the condition that autistic people experience. Autism is so much more than a problem, and "solving" it may have any number of consequences: eradicating great minds, unique perspectives and yet-to-be-realized novel visions that hold potential for powerful effects in today's world. It could also be said that in comparing autism to a puzzle, Autism Speaks insults and ignores the accomplishments, contributions, and the existences of autistic adults because a jigsaw puzzle is usually considered to be a juvenile toy commonly associated with children. Indeed, most of Autism Speaks's focus is on children, not adults, with autism.

Moreover, there seems to be a subliminal message in the shape of the specific logo that Autism Speaks has chosen. The top of the puzzle piece is rounded with two pairs of appendages above the jagged, lower edge. In this way, the piece resembles a

disenfranchised person with a small head, outstretched arms, and outstretched legs. The piece appears helpless, dependent, and alone in this posture. It is broken apart from the whole, evoking pity. Also, ironically, though the organization is called Autism Speaks, this logo is inanimate with no voice. In reality, Autism Speaks presumptuously speaks for autism because autism supposedly does not have a voice to speak for itself. One would hope that autism awareness organizations are not aware of how they are demoralizing and dehumanizing autistic people through the promotion of this damaging metaphor. For this reason, one of the popular anti-Autism Speaks logos is the same blue puzzle piece superimposed by a red circle with a line through it accompanied by the caption, "I'm Not a Puzzle—I'm a Person!"

Unfortunately, metaphors associated with autism presented by advocacy groups have become starker and even more disturbing over time, illustrating more of these groups' true purpose. In December 2007, another organization, the New York University Child Study Center headed by Dr. Harold Koplewicz, compared autism and other disorders to kidnappers who steal and torture children. In this campaign, ransom notes were posted on billboards and in periodicals from these "monsters." For instance, the public service announcement for autism read:

> We have your son.
>
> We will make sure he will not be able to care for himself or interact socially as long as he lives.
>
> This is only the beginning.

This ad, and others like it, sparked an indignant outcry largely from the autism community, which primarily refers to autistic people, but it may also include non-autistic people who are part of the neurodiversity movement. According to Joseph F. Kras's article regarding this vilifying campaign (2010), the Autism Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) responded to Koplewicz's ransom notes with an online petition containing over 1300 signatures. Kras explains, "ASAN's complaints were threefold: (a) the ads stigmatize people with disabilities; (b) the ads contain inaccurate information and fail to convey the strengths and successes of those with disabilities; and (c) the ads discourage parents from seeking assistance for their 'doomed' children" ("The 'Ransom Notes' Affair: When the Neurodiversity Movement Came of Age"). After three weeks, NYU Child Study Center pulled the ads. Ari Ne'eman, president of ASAN, expressed concerns of the autistic community in a more conversational way during a 2008 interview on *Good Morning America,* telling reporter Deborah Roberts, "These ads reinforce a lot of the prejudice that cause many of the difficulties we [autistic individuals] have. Where does disability come from? It comes, in many respects, from a society that doesn't provide for an education system that meets our needs and from a society that is largely intolerant."

The metaphor that compares disability to a kidnapper raises other judgmental messages. It implies that autistic people are victims, hopeless and (again) helpless, at the ruthless mercy of their "captors." As Kras describes it, "Relying on melodramatic stereotypes and caricatures, the ads portrayed children with childhood psychiatric

disorders as something they are not: captured, kidnapped, trapped, and incapable of caring for themselves" ("The 'Ransom Notes' Affair . . ."). This campaign is a scare tactic designed to create a desire in parents to rescue their children from the evil clutches of autism by whatever means necessary. However, those who are only mystified by autism and who have never experienced autism fail to realize what a poor metaphor this is. Rarely, if ever, does a kidnapper allow a "victim" to flourish. Rarely, if ever, does a kidnapper endow a victim with gifts and talents that greatly exceed any ransom. Yet in many cases, that is what autism does. Dr. Koplewicz's ad campaign, like the puzzle piece, focuses only on autism's negative attributes as perceived from an unenlightened perspective and creates an unmerited stereotype.

One of the worst comparisons came from Autism Speaks in September 2009 in the short film "I Am Autism," created by two highly acclaimed artists, songwriter Billy Mann and director Alfonso Cuarón. The video consisted of home video of autistic children engaged in their "abnormal" form of play as a dark, husky male voice speaks over them saying the following:

> I am autism. I'm visible in your children, but if I can help it, I am invisible to you until it's too late. I know where you live, and guess what? I live there too. I hover around all of you. I know no color barrier, no religion, no morality, no currency. I speak your language fluently, and with every voice I take away, I acquire yet another language. I work very quickly. I work faster than pediatric AIDS, cancer, and diabetes combined. And if

> you are happily married, I will make sure that your marriage fails. Your money will fall into my hands, and I will bankrupt you for my own self-gain. I don't sleep, so I make sure you don't either. I will make it virtually impossible for your family to easily attend a temple, a birthday party, a public park, without a struggle, without embarrassment, without pain. You have no cure for me. Your scientists don't have the resources, and I relish their desperation. Your neighbors are happier to pretend that I don't exist, of course, until it's their child. I am autism. I have no interest in right or wrong. I derive great pleasure out of your loneliness. I will fight to take away your hope. I will plot to rob you of your children and your dreams. I will make sure that every day you wake up, you will cry, wondering, "Who will take care of my child after I die?" And the truth is, I am still winning, and you are scared, and you should be. I am autism. You ignored me. That was a mistake. ("Autism Speaks Reaches a New Low")

Beleaguered family members stating their resolve to fight this foe with whatever means necessary follow this diatribe, announcing that "Autism is naïve. You are alone. We are a community of warriors. We have a voice . . . . Autism, if you're not scared, you should be. When you came for my child, you forgot, you came for me! Autism, are you listening?" ("Autism Speaks Reaches a New Low").

The reaction from the autism community to this particular presentation from Autism Speaks was perhaps stronger than it was for Koplewicz's ransom notes. The reason could be simply because this video was much more widespread; while the ransom notes campaign was primarily featured in the New York area, the video was initially posted on Autism Speaks' website and therefore was internationally available. Of course, the script for this video is even more sinister than the text presented on the ransom notes, and the vilification also seems to be greater. Disability studies scholars Emily and Ralph Savarese (2010) observe that the speaker who is personifying autism "sound[s] like Satan himself," and the Savareses go on to declare the script of this video to be "hate speech" ("'The Superior Half of Speaking': An Introduction"). The video was soon removed from the official Autism Speaks website but remained on YouTube for several months. Eventually, it was pulled from YouTube as well.

Perhaps a devil is the metaphor presented in "I Am Autism." Autism is clearly represented as an evil, invisible enemy who delights in the suffering of mere mortals. Again, it depicts those with autism as helpless and suffering at the hands of this dreaded foe. Also, once more, it is a one-sided depiction, focusing only on the superficially, externally perceived negative aspects of autism. Obviously, someone who is autistic did not write this piece. It is directed to express the frustrations and fears of many parents of autistic children, not to speak for autism or for those with autism. It does not even begin to express what it feels like to have autism, only what it appears like to an outsider. This particular ad also relies on fallacies. For instance, the script implies that marriages with

autistic children often end in divorce. However, according to a study conducted by Easter Seals and the Autism Society of America (2009), the divorce rate of families with autistic children is actually lower than it is for those families with no disabled children ("Please Distribute! Autistic Community Condemns Autism Speaks' 'I Am Autism' Video"). The threat posed by autism as it is presented in this video is menacingly inflated and urges parents to fight and/or to donate money, but once again it is a skewed, dehumanizing depiction of people with autism.

This apprehensive treatment of autism is certainly not new. In fact, negative metaphors for autism have dominated the world of psychology since the label has been available as a diagnosis. Douglas Biklen proposes such an argument in the first chapter of his book *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone* (2005): "Unfortunately, metaphor is ubiquitous in the field of autism. For example, the manner in which many autism experts relate autism to intelligence illustrates how representations of autism are culturally constructed" (36). One might ask, however, why Biklen refers to this trend as unfortunate. After all, metaphor can be a useful tool, not only in the field of literature but also in the field of science and, indeed, in the fertile field of human imagination. As Lakoff and Johnson explain, "We draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how we in part structure our experience, consciously or unconsciously, by means of metaphor" (158). Why are metaphors seen as bad or wrong in this instance?

To understand, one must be familiar with the approach to such comparisons in the field of disability studies. Ne'eman's quote above regarding the ransom note campaign refers to a commonly accepted idea in disability studies, that disability is in many ways socially constructed. From this view, there are two ways to construct disability: using a medical model and using a social model. In his article "Autism and Culture" (2010), Joseph N. Straus describes the medical model with these recognizable aspects:

> First, medical culture treats disability as pathology, either a deficit or an excess with respect to some normative standard. Second, the pathology resides inside the individual body in a determinate, concrete location. Third, the goals of the enterprise are diagnosis and cure. If the pathology cannot be cured—if the abnormal condition cannot be normalized—then the defective body should be sequestered lest it contaminate or degrade the larger community. (537)

This view is perhaps the most popular and most recognized way of understanding disability. Kras says that the majority of the medical community utilizes this model, and while it can be useful and has its purpose, such as when someone visits a doctor with a virus or disease and receives the adequate medical procedures, "the medical model can create a distorted view of what life with a disability is like, and it can promote further prejudice against the very people the medical establishment is trying to help" ("The 'Ransom Notes' Affair . . .").

For this reason, Disability Studies advocates a social model of disability construction. This addresses the needs of the individual with a disability. Kras explains that "social constructionists believe disability is created by the attitudes, prejudices, and barriers erected by society not by some problem or inherent deficit within the individual" ("The 'Ransom Notes' Affair . . ."). Furthermore, Tom Shakespeare in his definition of the social model calls attention to civil matters of disabled people, stating: "Social model thinking mandates barrier removal, anti-discrimination legislation, independent living, and other responses to social oppression . . . . Civil rights, rather than charity or pity, are the way to solve the disability problem" (268). One example of this view would be that a person in a wheelchair is not really impaired in mobility until he needs to ascend to a second floor and the only available method of transport is a staircase. When a ramp or an elevator is not available to such a person, his or her specific needs are hindered and his or her rights are infringed. Those who use the social model, therefore, would seek to identify specific needs of an individual with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and would do their best to make adequate accommodations to improve his or her quality of life and to help ensure that he or she can function in a world that is not designed for autism. In autistic discourse, the word commonly used to describe such a world and people who are not autistic is "neurotypical" (NT). The social model also recognizes culture associated with disability, as Straus points out that social-constructionists see "self-aware people claiming autism as a valued political and social identity and celebrating a shared culture of art and everyday life" (537).

The medical model drives all three of these metaphors—the puzzle piece, the kidnapper, and the devil. They all portray autistic people as deviant from the so-called "norm"[1] and needing to be fixed before they can be included within this category. They portray a society that would rather change autistic individuals rather than change the society, the latter being what the social model would attempt to achieve. All three metaphors suggest autism as a blight on society that must be eradicated, with total disregard for the feelings or needs or voices of persons with autism. As Kras notes, "While sensationalistic messages attract attention in advertising, in the case by emphasizing and amplifying only the *negative* aspects of the psychiatric disorders, they do not provide a fair picture of their subjects, which they are ethically obligated to do" ("The 'Ransom Note' Affair . . .").

Of course, autism is not the only disorder that has endured association with negative metaphors. In fact, using biased metaphors for disorders is not a new phenomenon. Throughout her essay "Illness as Metaphor" (1977), Susan Sontag traces disparaging metaphors associated with tuberculosis and cancer across centuries. She demonstrates that tuberculosis has been compared to a thief of one's life (5), while cancer is metaphorically constructed as a conqueror of the body (14). Misunderstandings of both diseases drew other untrue comparisons; tuberculosis was associated with poverty, while cancer was associated with the affluent, though in truth both diseases know no such economic distinctions (15). Both diseases have been considered as diseases of passion

[1] Disability scholars also maintain that normalcy is socially constructed and therefore an unfair quality to pursue for those who do not fit it. See Leonard J. Davis's "Constructing Normalcy."

and have been romanticized to some degree (20). However, these metaphorical depictions wrongly rob those who are diagnosed with these conditions of hope and dignity. According to Sontag, "As long as a particular disease is treated as an evil, invincible predator, not just a disease, most people with [the disease] will indeed be demoralized by learning what disease they have" (7). Sontag extends this argument in a follow-up essay, "AIDS and Its Metaphors" (1988), in which she says that AIDS is metaphorically constructed in the same way as cancer, as an invading conqueror (105). She argues that AIDS is dehumanizing since it is so quickly associated with death, explaining, "The most terrifying illnesses are those perceived not just as lethal but as dehumanizing, literally so" (126). AIDS does that because it automatically stigmatizes a person and "turn[s] the patient into 'one of them'" (126).

Since Sontag, other scholars have identified various other conditions that have been affected by metaphor. Scott Danforth, for example, has written a number of essays discussing the unique ways that metaphor interacts with disabilities such as mental retardation ("Speech Acts: Sampling the Social Construction of Mental Retardation in Everyday Life") and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ("Tracing the Metaphors of ADHD: A Preliminary Analysis with Implications of Inclusive Education") to shackle these conditions with the disparaging definitions that the general populace understands. One idea he points out is that metaphor has an interactive element that gives new meaning to both objects being compared. The example he provides is the metaphor "man is a wolf." In understanding this metaphor, one can perceive animalistic or predatory

characteristics in human beings but can also perceive human-like attributes in wolves. Danforth states, “Only metaphor can produce the complex and fecund range of possible meanings about either subject or the complex, active cross-domain dynamics that are produced in the seemingly simple concept ‘man is a wolf’” (“Disability as Metaphor: Examining the Conceptual Framing of Emotional Behavior Disorder in American Public Education” 10).

Alicia Broderick and Ari Ne’eman also investigate the effects metaphors have on autism in their article “Autism as Metaphor: Narrative and Counter-Narrative” (2008). Broderick and Ne’eman comment that some of the most common metaphors involve special configurations, such as alien metaphors and imprisonment metaphors (463-66). In viewing these metaphors, Broderick and Ne’eman conclude that the purpose is two-fold: “(1) to create a commonsensical narrative congruence between common understandings of autism and currently dominant notions about its aetiology(ies) or cause(s), and (2) to create a commonsensical narrative congruence between common understandings of autism and current dominant notions about appropriate responses to or interventions for autism” (459).

Another metaphor Broderick and Ne’eman cite, comparing autism to a disease, has more of the interactive nature to which Danforth refers. Autism Speaks often compares autism to conditions such as cancer, even suggesting that autism is worse than cancer because it is a lifelong condition. This gives autism a new, stigmatizing meaning that is completely false. As Broderick and Ne’eman remind us, though autism is a

lifelong, neurological condition, it is not fatal in any respect. However, they add, "in drawing upon these disease metaphors, living life as an autistic person is often metaphorically constituted as being a fate as bad as, if not worse than, death" (469).

There is a problem with all these metaphors. The puzzle piece, the abductor, the prison, the devil, the epidemic—none of these metaphors, ironically enough, begins to describe what autism is really like. They offer only "outsider" perspectives, focusing on what it is like to have an autistic child or to know someone with autism, never about what it is like to *have* autism. Furthermore, even though metaphors like these are sometimes used by autistic people, such as the alien metaphor (one popular website designed for autistic people is called "Oops . . . Wrong Planet"), they still do not adequately describe the autistic experience in ways that neurotypical people can understand. They do not explain what autistic people feel or why they act the way they do. In short, they do not assert or advance an autistic identity. This is what Autism Speaks has ignored, and this is truly a mistake. If we can unmask undesirable metaphors like these, we can hopefully further the social model and come to understand autistic people more as people—people with challenges and blessings, needs and gifts.

On the other hand, this is not to say that constructive metaphors for autism do not exist or that they have not been discussed. Of course, the best place to look for such insightful language is from autistic people themselves. Biklen's *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone* includes submissions by and interviews with autistic people, such as documentary subject Sue Rubin and poet Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, describing their

experiences with autism. Other critics have looked at memoirs of autistic people, such as Temple Grandin's *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (1986) or John Elder Robinson's *Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's* (2007), for their language discussing the autistic experience. Yes, these do contain vivid, descriptive passages, phrases, and comparisons of what autism is like, but this research has already been done. What else exists?

Unfortunately, the general public does not tend to hear or read these direct experiences. As it is with so many subjects, the public gets much of its information regarding autism from popular culture—films, novels, and television shows. Stuart Murray is quite right when he notes that popular media often uses autism seeking to fulfill "the complex desires of a society that wishes to be fascinated with a topic that seems precisely to elude comprehension" (4). Where can we find metaphors for autism readily available to the public from these forms of media that can aid in society's comprehension of the topic? Since the multi-Oscar award-winning film *Rain Man* (1989), numerous films with autistic characters, most of which Murray analyzes in his book *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (2000), have been released. The majority of these films of the late 1990s focus on characters with savant abilities, but as we will see, other aspects of the autism spectrum have been given their share in movies. Literature is another form of popular media that portrays autism, most notably in Mark Haddon's recent novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), but such pieces have also been analyzed in detail by academia.

Then, there is television, a medium which is probably the most prolific in depicting autistic characters, although strangely enough, academia has not paid it much attention. Numerous shows in almost every genre (comedy, drama, news, talk shows, even unscripted "reality" shows) have featured characters with some sort of ASD. Most of these offerings are generally referred to as "very special episodes," meaning that the autistic character only appears once and that the protagonists spend the episode helping him or her with some issue. The intended purpose of these episodes appears to be informative and educational. Yet in most of these television shows, autistic characters are barely characters at all, and playing an autistic child requires little to no acting skill, as Murray notes that child actors who play autistic children are "often underplayed, frequently featuring a lack of speech and expression as if they have been directed *not* to act" (128). Most information-driven programming that considers itself to be educational routinely describes autism as an "epidemic," an "illness," a "problem," or a "disease." Several of these shows promote dubious, sensational statistics of autism's prevalence. Talk shows debating the unproven possibility that vaccines cause autism often feature parents at their wits' end, describing how hard it is to "deal with" an autistic child and how the disorder is tearing their family apart. Even worse, the devalued, dehumanized autistic member of the family is nearly always excluded from the conversation, even if he or she is capable of verbal communication. Therefore, metaphors for autism in these instances are also centered on the medical model.

However, in the past ten years, there have been more shows with prominent autistic characters who appear either as protagonists or as parts of the main cast. Since these characters help drive the narrative, not every episode can be an educational venture into all of the symptoms of savantism or Asperger's Syndrome or some other ASD. These characters develop and evolve like any of the other characters in the cast. After all, the audience has to get to know these characters as human beings. Perhaps this is why they are so popular, because they do what other media fails to do. Best of all, these characters demonstrate, to some degree, that having an ASD is not all bad; there are positive and negative attributes which affect the characters' lives in powerful ways. In addition, some recent independent and foreign films dealing with autism represent the tradition more holistically than other presentations, looking at both positive and negative characteristics and presenting authentic characters.

Watching these programs, we may notice that certain themes emerge and re-emerge. Symbols, messages, and metaphors (perhaps more visual metaphors) continue to make an appearance in many of these shows and films. They are probably not intentional, but they do not seem to be a coincidence. They do appear to be saying something profound about autistic identity and provide solid comparisons of what an autistic experience is like. Some of these are still stereotypes, perhaps exaggerating some misunderstandings of autism, but they are still worth examination so that they can be dealt with and retired. The message beyond such stereotypes, however, could change the way the public views autism spectrum disorders in a very powerful, positive way.

These messages, themes, symbols, and metaphors are the topic of this discussion. Although Sontag writes at the beginning of "Illness and Metaphor" that "the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (3), this statement may not be entirely true. If, as stated before, metaphor is central to the way we think and autism is something that the majority of people do not understand, we need to have the correct metaphors that will help the public see more of what autism demonstrates, beyond what advocacy groups such as Autism Speaks showcase. If such messages can be found in media that are widely available and accessible, that would make this task easier.

The following three chapters will explain what aspects of the selected characters identify them for this study based on the qualifications for autism. In Chapter Two, brief synopses of the chosen films will also be provided, and for all pieces any information given by the writers, directors, creators, or actors explaining their positions concerningtheir relative concepts about these characters and why they choose to portray these characters as they do will also be given. Chapters Three and Four will do the same for television characters selected for the study. The remaining chapters will look more deeply into metaphors and messages that these characters impart about autism. Chapter Five will focus on two visual metaphors that tend to be ubiquitous in autism portrayals, the use of the masquerade and the detective motif. Chapter Six will discuss three recurring themes in autism portrayals: honesty, innocence, and violence, as well as what such themes say about autism. Chapter Seven will focus more on portrayals and

metaphors regarding relationships and communication, specifically analyzing friendships, business relationships, romantic relationships, and parent-child relationships. Throughout Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, instances in the television shows and films will be provided to highlight the discussed metaphors, and any pertinent information in scholarship discerning what these symbols might mean will be offered. Finally, Chapter Eight will consider the positive and negative aspects of all discussed metaphors and will offer some suggestions for future portrayals of autism, mostly focusing on trends that should continue and trends that should improve.

Some details need to be explained about autism at the beginning. What is autism? The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition* (*DSM-IV*), the reference manual for the diagnosis of all mental disorders (2000), describes autism as the possession of at least six of these characteristics:

> (1) Qualitative impairment in social interaction as manifested by:
>
> (a) marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction
>
> (b) failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
>
> (c) a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people
>
> (d) lack of social or emotional reciprocity

(2) Qualitative impairments in communication as manifested by:

(a) delay in, or total lack of, the development of spoken language

(b) in individuals with adequate speech, marked impairments in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others

(c) stereotyped and repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language

(d) lack of varied, spontaneous, make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level

(3) Restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities, as manifested by:

(a) encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus

(b) apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals

(c) stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms

(d) persistent preoccupation with parts of objects (DSM-IV 75)

There are other symptoms not provided here because they do not always appear in autism spectrum disorders, but they are not uncommon, and they do appear in many of the works being analyzed. Of course, the symptoms probably most recognized with autism are giftedness and other above-average mental skills. Some people with autism have exceptional memory, lively imagination, and high intelligence. In addition, five to ten percent of autistic people have a condition known as hyperlexia, which greatly improves

reading ability and verbal skills but greatly impairs social interaction (Jensen 11, 19-21). People with hyperlexia learn how to read at an early age, are often self-taught, and then become somewhat addicted to reading. They may have extraordinary reading speed and/or the ability to read despite adverse stimuli, such as a noisy room. Autism spectrum disorders usually have symptoms regarding sensory issues. Autistic people experience some stimuli differently than do neurotypical people. Often, autistic people are more sensitive to certain stimuli. They may panic when hearing certain sounds or throw a tantrum when exposed to adverse textures. Finally, though autism is mostly an "invisible disability" in that there are no obvious physical markers, some physical issues exist. MRIs and autopsies have shown that many autistic people have a malformed cerebellum (Nadesan 152-53). This affects posture, coordination, balance, and fine motor skills. That is why some autistic people have trouble with some everyday tasks that most neurotypical people find simple, like riding a bicycle or driving a car.

As stated earlier, this study will for the most part focus on depictions of autism in films and television shows. Though all the films selected: *Adam* (2009), *Mozart and the Whale* (2004), *My Name is Khan* (2010), *Ocean Heaven* (2010), and *Temple Grandin* (2010), include autistic characters who clearly express their diagnoses, the characters in the selected television shows fall into three categories regarding autism diagnoses. Three of the television shows include characters with a clear autism diagnosis. These are *Alphas* (2011-12), *Boston Legal* (2004-08), and *Parenthood* (2010-present). Three shows have characters with an ambiguous diagnosis, meaning that a diagnosis is implied or

suggested but never confirmed. For example, the show *Bones* (2005-present) includes characters whom the writers intend to be autistic but never say so directly in the script. *Community* (2009-present), *Criminal Minds* (2005-present), and *Sherlock* (2010-present) include characters about whom someone in the cast suggests an autistic diagnosis, but the character never admits this, and the writers do not confirm that autism is intended. Sometimes in these cases the actors deliberately portray their characters in an autistic manner because they are convinced they are supposed to be autistic because of characteristics scripted for the characters. However, in four of these selections, the creators and writers deny that they intended these characters to be autistic. In *Monk* (2003-09) and possibly in *Criminal Minds* and in *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* (2001-11), the characters in question are actually intended, by the shows' creators, to have another psychological condition, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder or schizophrenia; however, the way that the symptoms are portrayed may make autism a more consistent diagnosis. In other cases, especially *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present) and *House, MD* (2004-12), the writers have no such conditions in mind; they simply intend their autistic-like characters to be perceived as eccentric but otherwise neurotypical. This study is not meant to offer a definitive diagnosis for any of these characters; I am not a psychologist and am therefore not qualified to make diagnoses. These are simply observations of a scholar of popular culture and disability studies, and an autistic individual.

One could suggest that including characters who are not intended to be autistic in this discussion does not help the argument since there is no concrete proof in the primary material to suggest that they fit the topic. However, there are several reasons why they are central to the argument, and it is important to examine them. First of all, a piece of fiction does not necessary have to mention autism to be about autism. Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a good example. This novel will be mentioned at certain points in this study because it seems that many of the study's primary sources draw from Haddon's novel (it will not be discussed at length since that research has also been done) because it is widely recognized as being told from the point of view of a teenager with Asperger's Syndrome. On some editions of the book, the synopsis on the back cover says so. However, Asperger's Syndrome is never mentioned in the book, nor is autism. The closest suggestion of a diagnosis occurs when the narrator, Christopher Boone, lists his "Behavioral Problems," which read much like the diagnosis for Asperger's Syndrome straight out of the *DSM* using more simplified terminology (46-47). Haddon may not have intended for Christopher Boone to be autistic, but the response to his novel has caused him to accept that diagnosis. In the same way, characters in some of the television shows discussed are more autistic than their creators may have intentionally realized, and perhaps some of these writers, much like Haddon, may eventually admit that autism is most likely what they are portraying.

Second, it is not unheard of or unacceptable for scholars in disability studies to speculate about diagnoses for fictional characters. Autism was not an available diagnosis

until the 1940s following the work of psychologists Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger (Murray11). However, some very convincing critiques have suggested that characters from literature written in the nineteenth century depict autism. In *Representing Autism,* Stuart Murray makes such a claim for the title character of Herman Melville's short-story "Bartleby the Scrivener" and even suggests that the story is superior to Haddon's novel as "*the* great literary text of autistic presence" (50-60, emphasis Murray's). In her article, "'On the Spectrum': Rereading Contact and Affect in *Jane Eyre*" (2008), Julia Rodas provides a detailed critique offering her theory that the title character of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is autistic. Both of these writers justify why they were viewing these texts with a specific diagnosis in mind. Murray says his reading "is not simply to place a new variable in for the consideration of criticism. It is, rather, to suggest different possibilities as to what these stories *mean*" (12, emphasis Murray's). Rodas offers some very vital points in her defense:

> For many, the debate over diagnosis—especially insofar as it concerns the criteria of the *DSM*—is paramount, since the diagnostic pronouncement is immediately concerned with the distribution of material resources. However, for a larger portion of the population and for the purposes of fiction, formal diagnosis is beside the point. If an individual, no matter how eccentric, thrives without medical or therapeutic intervention, there is much to be said for resisting medicine, the disciplinary framework that exists, in many respects, for the tyrannical purposes of normalizing what is

> seen as irregular . . . . Likewise, for a fictional character, formal diagnosis can bring no benefit. At the same time, while diagnosis may not always be advantageous, coming to an understanding of autistic personality and a recognition of autistic characteristics, both within ourselves and in the world around us, can contribute to a more complex sense of identity and an enriched political consciousness. Thus, the suggestion of this essay . . . is intended not as an end, nor as an incarceration of the character within the rigid framework of a diagnosis, not as a gesture that cuts off meaning and interpretive possibility, but instead as a device to reopen discussion of the novel's politics and to challenge what seem to be some of our larger presuppositions regarding the political and social meanings of the individual. ("On the Spectrum . . ." par 9)

Here Rodas is claiming the suggestion that a fictional character is autistic neither helps nor harms him or her. Unlike a posthumous diagnosis of a historical figure, which will always remain speculative because psychological diagnoses cannot be definitively made after death, the suggestion of a fictional character's diagnosis is just another method of interpretation. As both writers observe, a viable diagnosis of a character can add different meanings to a work.

However, possibly the most important reason to consider characters who are only suggested as autistic is audience perspective. There is enough hinted in these characters to cause the audience to speculate about an autism diagnosis, and since the discussion

falls within the realm of popular culture, popular opinion is significant. As will be seen, no matter what the creators of a given show may say about their characters, the audience maintains its own opinions and interpretations. The most significant interpretations and opinions concerning autism may come from the autism community, and many autistic people[2] say that they identify with certain characters who are not intended to be autistic. If autistic people see autism in these characters, that too is significant.

Also, some explanation of the terminology selected for this study is needed, particularly why it does not refer to more specific diagnoses. Autism is recognized by the general populace as being a "spectrum" of disorders ranging from high-functioning (verbal and very intelligent) to low-functioning (non-verbal and sometimes mentally deficient). Most of the characters selected for this discussion would be adequately described as being on the high-functioning end, specifically having what is currently termed as Asperger's Syndrome. This study may refer to the condition as such, if the words "Asperger's Syndrome" appear in the material used. However, for the majority of the work, the study will refer to the characters in question simply as autistic people or as having an autism spectrum disorder.

There are a couple of reasons for this. Mainly, this decision is sensitive to proposed changes to the *DSM*. This most respected reference for diagnoses of mental disorders has been revised during the writing of this study. One of the most notable changes in the new *DSM* volume is that Asperger's Syndrome as well as the other

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[2] This is the politically correct term over "people with autism" because unlike others in the disability community, autistic people resist the politically correct "person-first" language. See Jim Sinclaire's essay "Why I Dislike Person-First Language."

specific diagnoses in the autism spectrum, such as Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified, have been compartmentalized into a simple diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. There has been a great deal of response about this decision, both positive and negative. Some psychologists say that Asperger's Syndrome is a vague, confusing term, and that blending the diagnosis in with the rest of the autism spectrum will be helpful. Ne'eman believes that this decision may help those persons diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome to be considered more eligible for certain services. However, some with Asperger's Syndrome feel that they will lose an identity to which they have become accustomed and have embraced with pride. It is also true that many of these opponents to the *DSM*'s new diagnostic philosophy say that they would rather not be associated with those individuals who occupy the other end of the spectrum. Other psychologists say the proposed diagnosis changes may lead to more misunderstanding and confusion and may make physicians reticent to give any diagnosis. As autism expert Tony Attwood explains, if a person with tendencies toward Asperger's Syndrome is told he or she should be tested for autism, the response would be, "No, no, no. I can talk. I have a friend. What a ridiculous suggestion!" (Wallace, "A Powerful Identity, A Vanishing Diagnosis"). Despite this controversy, the changes in the *DSM* will take place. According to the American Psychiatric Association, the revisions will also include more specific criteria gleaned from field trials, in order to "provide a more useful dimensional assessment to improve the sensitivity and specificity of the criteria" ("*DSM-5* Proposed Criteria . . ."). The new edition of the *DSM* will be released in May of 2013.

Yet another reason to avoid the use of the term Asperger's Syndrome is that the other side of the spectrum should not be ignored. Despite the way that Autism Speaks often portrays it, this "low-functioning" end of the spectrum has a powerful, valid voice, even if many of its members cannot physically speak. Blogger and advocate Amanda Baggs is an excellent example. She is non-verbal, but she takes exception to the notion of "high-functioning, low-functioning autism" because she does not want to be seen as low-functioning. Her YouTube video "In My Language" is one depiction of how and why she functions. Ms. Baggs, as well as previously-mentioned Rubin and Mukhopadhyay, are excellent examples of a powerful maxim in the autism community: "Not being able to speak isn't the same as having nothing to say." The following study may be somewhat focused on the higher-functioning end of the spectrum, but that is also true of the current entertainment industry. There are currently not many principal characters in popular culture who depict the lower-functioning side of autism. Trends indicate, however, that will change in the near future.

Autistic people should not have to feel ashamed of who they are. They should not have to feel ostracized or afraid because they are different. Parents of autistic children should not have to expect "gloom and doom" just because of a diagnosis or even because of a prognosis. Autism Speaks suggests catastrophe and ignominy in their metaphors. This work will look for what this and similar organizations have ignored and present reasons why autism is not a puzzle, a kidnapper, or a devil. Autism is a way of being.

CHAPTER 2

"It Doesn't Feel Like Anything; It Just Is!": Autism in Film

Typically a literary review summarizes secondary sources which discuss primary sources. However, the following two chapters review the primary sources of this study for a number of reasons. Most notably, there are little to no secondary sources that explore these primary sources in depth. Before this study makes the argument regarding the metaphors and themes of autism that have so far gone unrecognized, the reader needs to understand who these characters are, why they are applicable to this study, and what the creators are trying to portray by using autistic characters. Therefore, these chapters, though unconventional, are necessary.

The following films selected for this study have several similar characteristics. All have not been widely released in the United States either because they are independently produced, they are foreign films, or they have been released solely to a premium television channel (HBO). Therefore, they have not affected the public's opinion of autism as widely as *Rain Man* since that movie was more widely released and more highly acclaimed. Because of this, brief summaries are appropriate. Also, all of the autistic characters have a clear diagnosis which they claim as part of their identity, so there is no need to argue a case for their disorder as Chapters Three and Four will do for many of the selected television characters.

Adam, 2009, written and directed by Max Meyer

Summary

Adam Raki (Hugh Dancy) is a twenty-nine-year-old man living in New York whose world suddenly changes when a woman, an elementary school teacher named Beth Buckwald (Rose Byrne), moves into his apartment building. Beth becomes attracted to Adam and tries to talk to him, but he does not read her subtle intentions and repeatedly cuts short their conversations. Beth believes that their failure to connect is her fault, but Adam has his own ways of reaching her. Adam bluntly tells Beth that he has felt sexually stimulated during his excursions with her and asks if she has as well. Beth is disturbed, but then Adam explains that he has Asperger's Syndrome and is simply trying to understand her feelings because he cannot read her expressions. Adam implies that he is proud to have Asperger's, though he does not state this directly within the dialogue:

> Adam: One thing about it [Asperger's] is not knowing what people are thinking. Like right now?
>
> Beth: Oh, right! I guess I was wondering what that . . . feels like for you.
>
> Adam: Well, it doesn't feel like anything! It just is! My brain works differently from NTs.
>
> Beth: NTs?
>
> Adam: Neurotypicals. Sometimes I can't understand them, especially when they mean something different from what they're actually saying!
>
> Beth: You don't do that?

> Adam: Most aspies are really honest. Psychologists think it's a lack of imagination, but psychologists are mostly NTs! Albert Einstein, Thomas Jefferson, Mozart, they all had lots of imagination!
>
> Beth: They had Asperger's?
>
> Adam: (nods) Probably.

The news that Adam is autistic worries Beth that he is not "prime relationship material." Yet the more she learns about his disorder and the more she interacts with him, she comes to appreciate the circumstance, and she is drawn to Adam's honesty and innocence. Beth also learns to adapt her behavior to accommodate Adam's needs. For instance, she discreetly signals to Adam by touching his hand when she senses that he has overwhelmed someone in conversation by introducing too many statistics. She also often clarifies her statements if she speaks metaphorically to make her language more literal. As a result, Beth successfully develops a romantic relationship with Adam.

However, they face stressful challenges that threaten the relationship. Adam throws a tantrum in front of Beth when he learns that she deceived him. Adam loses his trust in Beth and ends his relationship with her, but he later regrets this decision. Seeking Beth's forgiveness, Adam sets out for Beth's parents' house. Adam arrives, standing in the snow at Beth's parents' address, and asks Beth to come with him to California as he goes to accept a new job. At first, Beth seems determined to move across the country with Adam, but then she realizes that his Asperger's presents an even greater distance to traverse. When Beth realizes that the reason Adam wants her with him is not because he

loves her but that he is dependent on her, she refuses to go. Adam does not know how to take the news, but eventually he leaves, alone, for California.

Behind the Scenes Perspectives

Max Meyer reveals in the DVD commentary for *Adam* that he was inspired to write the movie after hearing a National Public Radio interview with someone who has Asperger's Syndrome, describing what living with this condition is like. However, it becomes clear in the commentary that Meyer is really describing what he believes everyone experiences in relationships. Though he admits Adam's condition is more extreme, Meyer explains that significant, meaningful interactions with other people are universally challenging; he, too, struggles with social anxiety. He says, "I think we all kind of, or certainly I, identify with this waiting for something that you hope happens and then you don't hope happens . . . . And poor Adam has it a little bit . . . more so than the rest of us." The actors also see the movie in more universal terms, as we learn from an interview with them also included on the DVD. Dancy says that he was intrigued by Adam's humanity, explaining, "He's not just a syndrome; he's a guy." Byrne looks past the comment on autism to see the film's message about love in general, explaining, "The film, I think, deals with what gets lost in translation, and love is . . . the most sacred thing in the world, I think. There's obviously all sorts of different . . . variations of it, but I think it's something we need to tap into more and more and more" ("Creating Adam").

This tender relationship ultimately fails, and the film implies that all autistic romances will fail because autism is a great gulf that cannot be sustainably spanned. It

seems as though the movie plans from the beginning for Adam and Beth's relationship ultimately not to work. Producer Leslie Urdang indicates this on the DVD commentary:

> I think that was the central struggle and challenge of the film, which is the balance between . . . realizing that this is a very attractive and compelling man who has an obstacle toward intimacy and how do you balance between him being someone that this woman, Beth, and all women audiences could fall in love with and someone who, one wonders, if you can spend a life with. And that delicate balance was something that I think through the shooting process and through the editing process we were extremely aware of. How "normal" is he? How accessible is he? What about him is different and wonderful that any woman would fall in love with?

***Mozart and the Whale,* 2004 , Written by Ron Bass, Directed by Petter Næss**

Summary

Donald Morton (Josh Hartnett) runs his own support group for autistic people. The members represent a wide range of places on the spectrum, but Donald is the only member who has Asperger's Syndrome. It becomes obvious that he started this group because he feels alone and misunderstood. He tells the group, "People with Asperger's want contact with other people very much. We're just pathetically clueless at it; that's all!" When a young woman with Asperger's Syndrome named Isabelle Sorensen (Radha Mitchell) joins his group, Donald is immediately interested in her; but they do not have a romantic relationship until he asks her, on behalf of a friend, to attend a Halloween party,

to which he has no intention of going himself. Since both Donald and Isabelle are autistic, they understand each other's problems in a way that other people do not. However, there are some autistic differences that they do not share, and these unforeseen perspectives cause problems. Eventually, they realize that their similarities are necessary for a successful relationship, and they marry at the film's conclusion.

Behind the Scenes Perspectives

After the opening credits, the film begins with a title card reading, "This is a fictional story inspired by true events." Writer Ron Bass, who is also the co-writer along with Barry Morrow of the film *Rain Man,* explains during the DVD commentary that the film is based on a real married couple, Jerry and Mary Newport, who both have Asperger's Syndrome. "The story is completely fictional, but there are moments in their lives and things they told us that provided the inspiration for a lot of this [film]," Bass says. He mentions some of the moments in the movie that are true, but he does not discuss how the characters are really like their actual models or how the characters (real or imagined) feel about being autistic. Bass also provides a significant interpretation of the film:

> This [film] so epitomizes everyone's struggle to communicate. The difficulty of people being locked in their own lives and their own thoughts and their own problems is comically evident in people with Asperger's or autism, but it mirrors the way we are. We just have a little ability to scam and lie and conceal and hide over the fact that we're much more like these

> people underneath than we want to realize. So the essential humanity of them is touching, recognizable.

Many of the remarks Bass makes in this commentary illustrate how, in his opinion, everyone can relate to the kinds of relationship experiences the autistic characters encounter in *Mozart and the Whale*. It seems as though he argues that this film demonstrates that everyone is autistic to a certain degree, an intriguing observation similar to Meyer's interpretation of *Adam*.

***My Name is Khan,* 2010, Written by Shibani Bhatija and Niranjan Iyengar, Directed by Karan Johar**

Summary

Rizvan Khan (Shah Rukh Khan) is a Muslim who was raised in India. In Khan's youth, his mother taught him that there are only two types of people who exist in the world: people who do good deeds and people who do evil deeds. Khan moves to San Francisco to live with his elder brother when their mother dies. Khan's sister-in-law, a psychology professor, recognizes the symptoms of Asperger's Syndrome in Khan and has him officially diagnosed. Khan says of his diagnosis, "My fear of new places, new people, my hatred for the color yellow and sharp sounds, the reason for me [*sic*] being so different from everyone was defined in just two words: Asperger's Syndrome." Though his voice deepens and he speaks more slowly as he describes his disorder (implying an ominous tone), the content of what he says indicates some relief that he finally has an explanation for his acknowledged odd behavior.

Khan's brother hires Khan to be a salesman for his line of beauty products. On his rounds, Khan has a meltdown (a term that is recognized in the autism community as acceptable to describe an adverse reaction to the environment or unforeseeable circumstances) in the middle of the road. A kind woman named Mandira (Kajol) comes and comforts him. Khan follows her into a beauty salon and immediately goes into his sales pitch. He also discusses his disorder again but this time with a more positive tone:

> I may look a little strange to you, but that's because I have Asperger's Syndrome. It's named after Dr. Hans Asperger. This doesn't mean I am mad. Oh, no, no, no. I'm very intelligent. Very smart, very smart. But there are certain things I don't understand. For instance, people say when I go to their houses, "Come Rizvan, pretend like it's your own house," but how do I do that when the house isn't mine? I don't understand why people say one thing and think another. My *ammi* [mother] would say there are only two kinds of people in the world—good people and bad people. I'm a good person. I do good deeds.

Mandira is intrigued by Khan's honesty, and Khan is also intrigued and enamored with Mandira. He spends a great deal of time with her, watching her, imitating her, and talking to her. Then, he suddenly proposes to Mandira, but she rejects him. Khan learns that Mandira had been in an arranged marriage; her husband was abusive, and he eventually left her to raise their only child, a son named Sameer, by herself. When he understands Mandira's reticence, Khan again offers his proposal, "If you don't love him, marry me." He is persistent and repeats his proposal until she finally agrees.

They move to Banville, California, where Mandira opens her own salon. Business is good, and the Khan family is very happy together. Then, from across the continent, September 11, 2001 changes everything. Khan's family faces several hardships, culminating in Sameer's violent murder. Overcome with grief, Mandira blames Khan for Sameer's death, saying that it was Khan's Islamic faith that was the reason behind the hate crime. She yells at Khan to leave, but he does not understand that she means *forever*. Therefore, he innocently asks her when he should return. She answers that if he can go to the President of the United States and tell him that despite Khan's religion, despite his heritage, despite his name, Khan is not the terrorist father of a terrorist son, then he can return. Khan understands her literally and immediately starts rehearsing his message, "Mr. President, my name is Khan. I am not a terrorist."

Khan then begins an epic journey across the country, a quest that is reminiscent of other films about disability and discovery such as *Rain Man* and *Forrest Gump*. His journey receives national attention as the media portrays his innocence and selflessness. In the end, this journey affects Mandira as well, and she reunites with her husband just before he keeps his promise to deliver the message to the president.

Behind the Scenes Perspectives

There are a few interviews with the cast and crew in the DVD features that contain significant comments about this film. None of them addresses the importance of Khan's autism. Perhaps it was included for no reason other than the fact that Asperger's Syndrome is a new topic for Indian films. In the feature titled "Changing the Face of Bollywood," the crew explains that they are trying to break the stereotype of Indian films,

which includes a reputation as a garish, prolific genre mostly comprised of love stories and music. Karan Johar, the director, explains that in *My Name is Khan* he is trying to branch out from Bollywood, appealing to a wider audience. The subject of autism, Johar says, helped toward that goal:

> There's a certain global point this film has. Shah Rukh [Khan's character] has a disorder. He has Asperger's Syndrome, which is high-functioning autism, and we had to project that in a very real way. Shah Rukh essentially hasn't done a role like this, definitely not with me, and definitely Indian cinema hasn't seen a disorder with a certain amount of research and a certain amount of honesty. So it is different not only for Shah Rukh and I, but it's also different, I think, for Indian cinema in a certain sense. ("Changing the Face of Bollywood")

My Name is Khan certainly takes great care to showcase autism explicitly. In fact, it is the only film selected for this study that begins with a disclaimer reading, "The protagonist in the film suffers from Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism. While the film endeavors to depict the character as authentically and sensitively as possible, it is a work of fiction and hence certain creative liberties have been taken in the portrayal of the condition." Autism is actually portrayed rather accurately, though some details seem to be borrowed from other works of fiction rather than from research about the condition itself. For instance, Khan goes into a rage whenever he sees the color yellow. This behavior could be a reference to *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

where Christopher, an autistic boy, explains his specific aversion to that color, but super-sensitivity to color is not a common symptom of autism.

On the other hand, after going out of their way to identify Asperger's Syndrome so overtly, curiously, the writers ultimately present Khan's disorder as a secondary consideration. Its prominence significantly fades as the movie continues in decided deference to Khan's identity as a Muslim in a post-9/11 world. Yet the writers even intend that platform to remain a secondary subplot. According to writer Niranjan Iyengar:

> *My Name is Khan* is actually a love story. Even when you have this subject at the core which is meant to be the racial discrimination and whatever's happening post-9/11 in the world, he [Johar] was very clear to write it out that it's not going to be a story about that. He wanted that part of the story to be a backdrop. So I look at it as a love story between Rizvan and Mandira. Everything else just complements and adds to that love story. ("The Story of *My Name is Khan*")

In Shah Rhuk Khan's interpretation, his character's autistic condition only complements and enhances the love story:

> I think what we touched upon is the fact that that we need to be more accepting of each other and that is part through the eyes of a neuro-atypical person who is seeing it more clearly than, perhaps, the so-called sane people . . . .You know, he doesn't react to love, romance, passion, hugging, anger, but somewhere down the line he realizes a person who

> does not feel so much, who's got that part of the brain or mind under-developed, is feeling more than the rest of the world. And why is that? Because I think he's simple, simple and even naïve. ("The Story of My Name is Khan")

Nevertheless, this film does some things that few autistic portrayals in this study do, such as suggesting that someone with autism can enjoy a successful relationship as a spouse and as a parent.

Ocean Heaven, 2010, Written and Directed by Xue Xiaolu

Summary

This film grapples with a question that plagues many parents of autistic children, especially those whose children occupy the more severe side of the spectrum: What will happen to my child when I die? Wang Xincheng (Jet Li) faces this agonizing dilemma when he is diagnosed with liver cancer. With only a few months to live, the widower's greatest concern is the fate of Dafu, his twenty-one-year-old autistic son (Wen Zhang). Dafu's verbal skills are limited (his speech is mostly, as described in the *DSM,* "stereotyped and repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language," also called echolalia), and he is unable to care for himself.

The film begins with a failed attempt at murder-suicide. The incident inspires Wang, as he brings a neighbor into his confidence to say that, "Even the Grim Reaper can't get him. So I think there's some place on earth for him to live." However, finding a place on earth for Dafu proves difficult. After much searching, Wang finds an institute for people with mental disabilities. Wang leaves his son in the facility's care, but Dafu

panics on the first night because his father is not there with him. As a result, Wang also moves into the institution in a selfless effort to acclimate his son to this new home. He also sets about the painstaking task of teaching his son to be more independent. Dafu does not seem to grasp the grave importance of these fundamental lessons.

Wang is further concerned about how Dafu will handle his absence after he observes his son's disappointment at the close of a friendship. A carnival comes to the aquarium where Wang is employed, and Dafu befriends a young woman, Ling (Kwan Lun Mei), who is a clown. Knowing that her stay is only temporary, Ling tries to teach Dafu how to use a telephone, but he does not understand. When the carnival leaves town, Dafu runs away. Wang finds his son dejected and seated on a bench beside a clown statue of Ronald McDonald.

Dafu's reaction to Ling's disappearance bothers Wang tremendously, and he confides in a neighbor that he has one last lesson to teach his son or he will "not be able to relax." He uses Dafu's favorite activity, swimming in the aquarium, to convey this message. Wang leads Dafu to believe that his father is going to be reincarnated as a sea turtle. He assures the boy that since turtles have a very long lifespan, Wang will always be with Dafu whenever he swims in the ocean. To make sure that Dafu understands this, Wang makes a sea turtle costume with a purple turtle shell and swims with Dafu. Shortly after this, Wang passes away. After his father's death, Dafu becomes more cognizant, resigned, and independent. He remembers the lessons his father taught him, though he still does not understand how to use the phone. He goes swimming, finds a sea turtle, and swims with it, holding onto its back.

Behind the Scenes Perspectives

In the behind-the-scenes interview on the DVD, writer and director Xue Xiaolu explains why she created *Ocean Heaven.* She worked with autistic children for over ten years, and she was so moved by their innocent and caring nature that it motivated her to write this script. Jet Li is best known as an action film star, so this is a very different role for him. He participated in this movie because of how moved he was after reading the script. "When I read the script," Li explains, "I was filled with feeling, aided by my own understanding and interest in autism over the years. So I thought, no matter what, we must try to fulfill the director's hopes and bring this story to life."

This film was a learning experience for both Jet Li and Wen Zhang. Li learned from this film how to perform a more serious, dramatic role. Zhang actually knew very little about autism before portraying Dafu, as he explains, "Before, I used to think that autism meant not talking, being very quiet and so forth. Later, when I came into contact with autism, I realized what it really is." Zhang learned about the extent of the autism spectrum in preparing to play the role of Dafu and gained a deeper respect for autistic people.

Li, Zhang, and Xiaolu all explain at the end of the interview that the purpose of this movie is awareness of families with autistic children, yet it addresses not only the challenges of autism but also the added weight of responsibility that parents of autistic children carry. Xiaolu specifically states that the message is meant to be positive as she draws attention to "[autistic people's] simple, invincible optimism." Li also elaborates on Xiaolu's point:

> I hope society will better understand that there is this group of parents and children. We, as members of this big "family" that is humankind, if we can help more, care more, encourage these parents and their children, they won't feel detached or as though no one understands what they are going through. If everyone expresses a little bit more love and care, then they will have more courage to continue down this path.

When Li's message of hope is compared to Autism Speaks's message of hopelessness, it is very easy to see that *Ocean Heaven* provides a much more positive perspective. It demonstrates that with patience, love, and understanding, even an autistic person on the lower end of the spectrum can learn to be independent and can live a good life. The movie recognizes, however, that this cannot happen without the heroic efforts of extraordinary people. It ends with a title card that reads, "This film is dedicated to all the ordinary heroes among our parents."

***Temple Grandin*, 2010, Written by Christopher Monger and William Merrit Johnson, Directed by Mick Jackson**

Summary[1]

It is Arizona, 1966, and a young woman named Temple Grandin (Claire Danes) is going to visit her aunt and uncle's ranch. There are flashes of how Temple perceives concepts in her mind, though the audience may not entirely understand what it is seeing. Sometimes when Temple looks at something, it freezes into a photograph. Sometimes she links those captured images to flashes of other images. When she hears a figure of

[1] This summary is rather long because there are more details in this film discussed in this study than any of the other film discussed.

speech, she vividly imagines a literal interpretation. Much of what she sees is overlaid and analyzed with mentally generated, animated blueprint-like designs. This indicates that she is clearly curious about how things work. She uses that curiosity to build a new opening mechanism for the ranch's front gate.

Very intrigued by the cattle on the ranch, Temple spends a lot of time in the field. One day, she notices a frightened cow struggling as it is given an inoculation. However, when the animal is placed into a booth called a squeeze chute, the cow calms. Later, when Temple becomes anxious, she, too, runs into the squeeze chute and begs her aunt to close it. Once the squeeze chute tightens around her, Temple calms as well.

At the end of the summer, Eustacia, Temple's mother (Julia Ormond), takes her daughter to college to Franklin Pierce College. Temple becomes very agitated when she realizes that she does not have a roommate. Eustacia explains that Temple's roommate will be coming later, but Temple is still upset. Eustacia walks out of the room to give her daughter a chance to calm herself and then thinks about the day that Temple was diagnosed with autism as a little girl. The psychologist had told her there was no treatment for the disorder and that the only option was to institutionalize the child. When Eustacia asked the doctor how this could have happened, the psychologist referred to the only theory available at that time (now acknowledged as incorrect) proposed by psychiatrist and critic Bruno Bettleheim: that autism was caused by a lack of bonding between a child and his or her mother. Eustacia refused to accept that, and she remembers all the effort she has invested into teaching her non-verbal child to speak.

Eustacia's flashback ends before we learn how she achieved the feat of finding Temple's voice, and Eustacia goes back into the room to find that Temple is calm.

However, Temple suffers another meltdown when she goes to the cafeteria. An automatic door is the only entrance to the serving line, and Temple associates it with a guillotine. When she sees it, she runs out of the cafeteria, an experience prompting Temple to build the prototype for her own personal squeeze chute. As Temple is trying it out for the first time, her roommate arrives and is disturbed by the strange sight. When a psychologist questions Temple about her machine, he misconstrues her answers and assumes she is using it for sexual gratification and recommends destroying Temple's squeeze machine.

At spring break, Temple returns to her aunt's ranch, builds another squeeze machine, and refuses to go back until she is allowed to keep it. Eustacia does not agree with Temple's use of the squeeze machine, so her aunt Ann goes to school, acting as Temple's advocate. Temple offers an experiment to see how other people react to the machine. She tests the machine on several students, gathers the information, and tries searching for connections. However, when grades are posted for her psychology class, Temple receives an F for her squeeze machine research and immediately calls her high school science teacher.

This leads to another flashback from four years earlier. Eustacia takes Temple to a boarding school in New Hampshire. The principal introduces Temple to all of her teachers, but she quickly becomes interested in the science teacher, Dr. Carlock (David Strathairn). Eustacia meets with the faculty to explain that Temple had been expelled

from her previous school. Understanding that policies are not going to be significantly different at this new school, she runs out of the meeting, and Dr. Carlock follows her. Distraught, Eustacia tells him that leaving her daughter at a boarding school is just as much a way of giving her up as institutionalizing her would be. Dr. Carlock assures her that it is, instead, a way for Temple to take the next meaningful step forward in her life. "Trust me, we all know how different she is," he says, to which Eustacia replies, "Different, not less."

Dr. Carlock begins to realize how unusual Temple's memory is and takes a special interest in her. Under his guidance, Temple thrives at the boarding school. Dr. Carlock speaks to Temple privately to persuade her to go to college and to realize her remarkable talent's potential. She asks him if she can study cows, and he answers that cows and other farm animals are studied in the science of Animal Husbandry, which makes Temple laugh because she imagines a man marrying a cow. When she announces her intention to stay in boarding school with him, Dr. Carlock encourages her to imagine college like a door to a new world and to make the decision to go through it. This image has a particular impact on Temple throughout her life.

Then the film returns to the present. Temple goes to the dean, and as Dr. Carlock advised her, tells him that she needs extra time to organize the surplus of information she has acquired in her study of the squeeze machine. Temple maintains that her research has proven her right to keep her machine and to receive a passing grade. The dean is tremendously impressed as he looks through Temple's research and agrees that her grade should be amended and allows her to keep her squeeze machine. With aid of the squeeze

machine helping her to cope with her anxiety, Temple successfully completes college. She delivers a speech at her graduation, proclaiming that a diagnosis of autism is not hopeless:

> When I was younger, I closed myself off from people. I didn't even speak until I was four. There's a highfalutin' name for this condition–autism. But because of my machine, I am able to know the kindness and love that has been given to me to reach this point in my life. Today, more than ever, I realized I have not walked alone, and I thank not only my teachers but my friends and family as well.

After graduation, Temple climbs a ladder at a construction site. At the top of the ladder, she finds a door. Remembering what Dr. Carlock said about new doors, she eagerly crosses the threshold. The scene transitions into the next scene, Temple beginning her master's degree in animal husbandry at Arizona State University. At a feedlot, Temple is overly distracted by the cows' continual lowing and frightened behavior. Ignoring the milieu of hostile condescension, Temple perceives that she is on the verge of understanding something important, and she tells her advisor that she wants to write her master's thesis on cattle agitation. The advisor tells her that a thesis on mooing would be "lowering the bar," which he does not want to do, autism or no. However, when Temple further explains her hypothesis that a better understanding of moos and cows' frightened behavior could ultimately improve the cattle industry, he relents.

Yet, when Temple reaches the feedlot, the guard stops her and explains apologetically, in response to complaints from the handlers' wives, that women are no

longer allowed on the premises. Temple then notices that all of the other workers drive old pick-up trucks and wear dirty Western clothing. She considers this to be another door to her future. So she trades in her Volkswagen Beetle for a used truck, buys new clothes, and covers everything in mud. When she returns to the feedlot, she looks like everyone else, so the guard waves her through. Though Temple cannot get the feedlot's owner to sign her research form, she continues to do her research anyway, suffering the same demeaning treatment from the cow handlers that she had experienced in school. However, one cow handler takes pity on Temple, signs her research form, and encourages Temple to expand her research to include auctions and rodeos. So Temple attends an auction, and while there, she sees the editor of *The Arizona Farmer-Ranchman* whom she approaches and asks if he would be interested in aiding in her research. He promises to read whatever she submits. As a result, Temple not only turns in a thesis to her advisor but also an article published in a periodical.

Once she obtains her master's degree, Temple decides to continue doing research for *The Arizona Farmer-Ranchman,* but the guard again refuses her entrance to the feedlot, and this time he is angrier. He says that they were lenient because she was a university student, but now that she has graduated, she is no longer covered by the feedlot's insurance. Frustrated, Temple goes to *The Arizona Farmer-Ranchman*'s main office to demand a press pass. The editor is displeased that she came to speak to them wearing dirty clothes, and he gets his secretary to buy new clothes for Temple. Temple selects designer Western wear and lapel pins shaped like cows. Armed with her press

pass, Temple enters the feedlot without even slowing down. She goes on to publish several articles in a number of publications having to do with the cattle industry.

In 1981, Temple and Eustacia attend a seminar for parents of autistic children. The speaker reprimands a mother for allowing her child to spin in circles, demanding that she control her child. The parents maintain their belief that stimming is beneficial for autistic children; Temple speaks up to say that she agrees. They ask Temple how old her child is, and when she replies that she is not a mother, the parents all groan; when she reveals that she is autistic, all the parents stare at her. She proceeds to tell a little of her story, revealing that she was non-verbal as a child, but that now she has a master's degree and is pursuing a doctorate. As the enthralled parents continue to question Temple, she explains part of the secret to her success:

> I'm not cured. I'll always be autistic. My mother refused to believe that I wouldn't speak, and when I learned to speak, she made me go to school. And in school and at home, manners and rules were really important. They were pounded into me. I was lucky, all these things worked for me. Everyone worked hard to make sure that I was engaged. I mean, they knew I was different but not less. You know, I had a gift. I could see the world in a new way. I could see details that other people were blind to. My mother pushed me to become self-sufficient. I worked summers at my aunt's ranch, I went to boarding school and college, and those things were uncomfortable for me at first, but they helped me to open doors to new worlds.

The parents desire to hear more, handing her a microphone and inviting her up to the podium. Temple sees a door at the stage, and as she approaches it, she hears voices from her memories and sees every major door she has ever entered, all opening of their own accord. Temple enters the most important door of her life, the way to share her life story and experiences with the world.

Behind the Scenes Perspectives

This is the only film selected for this study that is truly biographical. Instead of fictionalized characters with true details as part of their stories, *Temple Grandin* tells the real story of a real person. In fact, the DVD commentary includes director Mick Jackson, writer Christopher Monger, and the real Temple Grandin. She admits during this commentary that the story is scarily accurate and that Claire Danes essentially becomes "me during the 60's and 70's." She also mentions that most of the details in the movie are also true, although they did not occur in quite the same order. She explains, "Some of these scenes . . . [are] actually something I did a little bit later, but of course in a movie you have to time-compress things. Otherwise, you couldn't fit it into a two-hour movie. Most of the events in the movie actually happened, but some of the order is changed." However, many of the elements in the movie do not appear in Temple's books that are cited as sources for the screenplay, *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* and *Thinking in Pictures* (2006). The former mostly describes her early life, and the latter is a series of essays about her particular autistic experience. To my knowledge, there is no written description of Grandin's adult life. Jackson and Monger admit that they did fictionalize some aspects. For example, Dr. Carlock in real life did not have a doctorate, but Monger

claims that he elevated Temple's favorite teacher to the title of doctor "to make him more noticeable." Also, though the movie credits Dr. Carlock with devising the door metaphor for Grandin, she explains in the commentary that it was actually a symbol that she devised herself after entering a secret door that led to a tower on campus, a detail that is described clearly in *Emergence.* Probably the most significant, admittedly fictionalized scene is the scene in which Temple first sneaks into the feedlot. Grandin says that though the scene was slightly fictionalized, it was, nevertheless, in character. In reality, Grandin admits she even disguised Oliver Sacks to come with her to the feed yard as he was doing research on her.

As to why this movie was made, it seems HBO was interested in Temple's entire life story, not just her autism. Monger makes an interesting comment: "Some people said to me, 'Is the film about autism?' I don't think you make a film about autism; you make a film about a person, but it's also a film about an apprentice. This is [Temple] breaking into the cattle industry, a woman getting into the cattle industry at a time [when it was dominated by men]." Monger seems to find the fact that a woman could overcome prejudice in order to make a contribution to the cattle industry to be just as remarkable as a person overcoming the obstacles of autism in order to live a full life and make a contribution to the world. Jackson, meanwhile, expresses that he enjoyed making this movie because he is also a visual thinker, and this movie effectively provided a canvas for him to present images in a convincing way. He even tells Temple that her books read like a movie.

Furthermore, unlike all other films selected for this study, *Temple Grandin* was more widely received in America. Of course, that debut was on premium television, but more Americans avail themselves of access to that venue than they do to independent and foreign films. That is significant because it broadcasts to a broader audience the hopeful message that a nonverbal autistic person can become a success and change the world. Of course, it does not effectively show how that end result is accomplished, but the message is still there. As an added benefit, *Temple Grandin* won several prestigious awards, including Emmys, Golden Globes, and Screen Actor's Guild Awards. Tributes such as these help make this film more noticeable to the general public. This film does effectively show what it is like to view the world from an autistic perspective, and not many other films do this well.

All of these films, as we have seen from the summaries and commentaries, investigate both the positive and negative aspects of living with autism. The creators usually see autism not only as a disorder but as a commentary on neurotypical relationships as well. All of the films discuss different kinds of relationships with autistic people, particularly romantic and parent-child; and the relationships have both successes and flaws. These films also all make use of costuming in some fashion. These are all significant points of discussion in this study.

CHAPTER 3

"It is a Gift and a Curse": Autism on Television, Comedy

Since an autism diagnosis is not made clear in most television characters for this study, a more definitive approach is needed to defend such a claim. First, the following two chapters will discuss autistic characteristics that the characters display, basing those traits largely on the *DSM-IV*'s qualifications, and providing concrete examples. Then, if a diagnosis is suggested, hinted, or addressed at all, these chapters will examine how those characteristics are treated within the context of the show. Then, the study will take into consideration any pertinent comments from the actors, writers, or show creators as to their opinions about potential diagnoses or why they made their characters autistic. These chapters will conclude with comments regarding the significance these characters add to this study. This part of the study is divided in two chapters because so much detail is required. As for the television shows themselves, they are more widely released than the films, most of them airing on basic cable or network television. Some of them have very high ratings and/or awards, but others struggle. Information regarding the content on the show is provided as needed.

***The Big Bang Theory*, 2007-present, created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady,**

The Big Bang Theory is a sitcom centering on four "nerds" who work together at the California Institute of Technology: experimental physicist Dr. Leonard Hofstadter (Johnny Galecki), theoretical physicist Dr. Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons), astrophysicist Dr. Rajesh "Raj" Koothrappali (Kunal Nayyar), and engineer Howard Wolowitz (Simon

Helberg). Hofstadter and Cooper are roommates, and the show focuses primarily on the group's interactions with Hofstadter and Cooper's "normal" and very attractive neighbor across the hall, Penny (Kaley Cuoco).

Case Study: Dr. Sheldon Cooper, Performed by Jim Parsons

To borrow Stuart Murray's words, *The Big Bang Theory* just might be "the great [television] text of autistic presence" (50). Dr. Sheldon Cooper is a large part of this recognition. In fact, on a television fan website, *TV Squad,* 77.2% of viewers voted that they believe that Cooper has Asperger's Syndrome (Waldman). Cooper's autistic characteristics are very apparent when viewing this show.

Social impairment might be Cooper's greatest deficit. His eye contact, for the most part, is rather good. However, it may have significantly improved; Hofstadter relates that when he first met Sheldon, Cooper's eye contact was terrible ("The Staircase Implementation"). Even though Sheldon usually makes eye contact, he is not always appropriately connected or engaged. In one episode, Sheldon tries to comfort Leonard who is feeling depressed, but Sheldon delivers the whole conversation to the floor ("The Maternal Congruence").

Sheldon has not developed many peer relationships; "The Staircase Implementation" episode suggests that he would not have made his current friends if it were not for Hofstadter. Sheldon, before Hofstadter, was clearly not interested in companionship. Leonard purchased a leather couch for their apartment to replace the previous furniture: two lawn chairs. When Sheldon questions Hofstadter's purchase, Leonard explains that the lawn chairs left no room for company, to which Sheldon

replies, "Did it occur to you that was by design?" When Sheldon tries to make a friend on his own, he feels compelled to do excessive research into the procedure of friendship including conducting a survey of his current friends, reading books on the subject, and making a flow chart describing the process in detail ("The Friendship Algorithm"). Yet, perhaps the greatest clue to Cooper's social deficit is a comment from Sheldon himself, which clearly shows his preference for his work over personal relationships; when a young rival leaves the university to pursue a romantic relationship, Sheldon publically announces, "Ladies and gentlemen . . . while Mr. Kim, by virtue of his youth and naïveté, has fallen prey to the inexplicable need for human contact, let me step in and assure you that my research will go on uninterrupted, and that social relationships will continue to baffle and repulse me" ("The Jerusalem Duality").

Sheldon also demonstrates"a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people" as the *DSM* describes. In one episode, his friend Amy Farrah Fowler (Mayim Bialik) tells him that one of her papers has been published in a major periodical in her field. Sheldon tells her, with equal excitement, that he has gained a hundred followers on his Twitter account. Yet as Fowler continues to talk about her accomplishment, Sheldon is plainly more interested in his trifling victory. Amy leaves in despair, and Penny points out to Sheldon his mistake. Sheldon, however, maintains that Amy's accomplishment only *seemed* important, but it is not important to him because neurobiology is "all about yucky, squishy things" ("The Shiny Trinket Maneuver").

"Lack of social or emotional reciprocity" refers to an autistic person's inability to understand and reflect the emotion of other people and the inability to understand social mores. Sheldon has experienced both of these. From the second episode, "The Big Bran Hypothesis," we learn that he has difficulty discerning tone of voice in order to recognize sarcasm. Since then, he often questions his friends, directly, to determine if they are being sarcastic. Similarly, he has voiced his trouble reading facial expressions, and at times makes guessing them somewhat of a game, matching an expression to its corresponding emotion, as seen in this conversation with Raj:

> Sheldon: Forgive me, as you know I'm not adept at reading facial cues, but I'm going to take a stab here. You're either sad or nauseated.
>
> Raj: I'm sad.
>
> Sheldon: (flinches) I was going to say sad; I don't know why I hedged. ("The Pirate Solution")

Additionally, he follows his limited, formulaic understanding of social customs to a fault. For instance, he believes that social convention demands that when a guest is upset, the host must offer him a hot beverage. So if one of his friends comes to the apartment "down in the dumps," Sheldon makes sure that either he or Leonard prepares a cup of tea or cocoa. Even if the guest rejects the offer, Cooper curtly replies, "Sorry, it's not optional" ("The Cohabitation Formulation").

Yet there are some social conventions Sheldon cannot readily accept due to his lack of social reciprocity. One example is the social custom of giving gifts at holidays. In two episodes, when Penny is planning a surprise birthday for Leonard ("The Peanut

Reaction") and, on another occasion, when Sheldon receives a Christmas present from her, Sheldon explains why exchanging gifts makes "no sense" to him. In both episodes, his reasoning is that he cannot guess what the recipient would accept as a gift. In the Christmas episode, Sheldon phrases it this way, "The essence of the custom is that I now have to go and purchase for you a gift of commensurate value and representing the same perceived level of friendship as that represented by the gift you've given me. It's no wonder suicide rates skyrocket this time of year!" ("The Bath Item Gift Hypothesis"). Of course, this is a joke that induces the studio audience's laughter, but the anxiety is not lost for those who are in Sheldon's position. In neither explanation does Sheldon consider the gift-giving platitude of "It's the thought that counts" because Sheldon does not seem to possess that level of empathy.

The second category of autistic identifying characteristics that most affects Sheldon is restricted patterns of behavior and interests. Sheldon himself has recognized that he has a tendency to be preoccupied with concerns and with topics he finds particularly appealing. Once when Leonard complains about this aspect of his roommate, Cooper replies that "fixating . . . [is] consistent with my personality" ("The Good Guy Fluctuation"). In addition to the many interests he shares with the rest of his quartet of male friends (physics, comic books, video games, and science fiction), Sheldon has a particular fixation on trains. He obviously does not understand that this fascination is of little interest to the others. For example, Raj's sister visits from India and has only one day to spend with her brother. Raj asks for suggestions of ways to entertain his sister, and Sheldon (with uncharacteristic eagerness) tells Raj to "make it a train day,"

proceeding to lay out a full itinerary that includes eating in restaurants that are converted dining cars and visiting a museum of antique train parts. When Raj rejects that idea, Sheldon just scoffs, "Well then, apparently you hate fun." Sheldon also tells Raj's sister when she rejects his entertainment suggestions, "You might as well wait at the airport for your flight" ("The Irish Pub Formulation").

Sheldon's life is certainly defined by ritual. He has a strict weekly routine dictating what and where he eats and what activities will occupy his and his friends' time each day, and he does not like to divert from it. When his friends propose "Anything Can Happen Thursday" in theinterest of pursuing variety, Sheldon is clearly uncomfortable, saying that he has "fallen down the rabbit hole and into a land of madness" ("The Hofstadter Isotope"). Also, Sheldon is obsessively particular about where he sits in a room, a quirk that occupies several scenes in the series. At his apartment, Sheldon has selected (for a host of self-absorbed reasons) a favorite spot on the sofa. Not only is Sheldon uncomfortable sitting anywhere else, he also will not allow anyone to sit in "his spot." He further verbalizes his aversion to change when such a circumstance arises and his friends assure him that it will be fine. Sheldon retorts, "No, it's *not* going to be fine! Change is never fine! They say it is, but it's not" ("The Dead Hooker Juxtaposition").

"Stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms," as described in the *DSM*, is often called by the autistic community "self-stimulating behavior" or "stim," which can function as either a noun or a verb. Stims include repetitive behaviors that are calming to the autistic individual but that, often, are not considered socially acceptable, such as flapping hands. Sheldon has one particular stim, which was first revealed in "The

Loobenfeld Decay" and has become a staple of his personality throughout the series. Whenever Sheldon visits someone, he always knocks on his or her door three times, calls his or her name, and repeats this process twice. For example, if Sheldon wants to speak to his neighbor across the hallway, he consistently proceeds this way: "(three knocks) Penny! (three knocks) Penny! (three knocks) Penny!" This is another process that he does not like to have interrupted. In "The White Asparagus Triangulation," Penny opens her door on his second round of knocks; Sheldon slowly knocks the final round on her doorpost and whispers her name before speaking to her. Penny has the most fun playing with this idiosyncrasy, though she does find it to be annoying, but Sheldon does not see any reason to stop this behavior. In one episode, Penny has the following conversation with him:

> Penny: You do realize that I stand on the other side of this door waiting for you to finish knocking three times?
>
> Sheldon: I know. I can see the shadow of your feet under the door.
>
> Penny: My point is it's a waste of time.
>
> Sheldon: If you're looking for an example of a waste of time, I would refer you to the conversation we're having right now. ("The Robotic Manipulation")

The autistic category of diagnosis in which Sheldon displays the least impairment is communication. His speech is eloquent and clear, and he usually understands his friends' speech. He has no problem sustaining a conversation; Sheldon's problem is that he prefers to *dominate* conversation with "alternative topics," usually involving his vast

reservoir of trivial knowledge. For instance, in one episode, Leonard wishes to discuss his seeming inability to procure a girlfriend; Sheldon responds with random information about the capybara, an exotic rodent. When Leonard asks him what that has to do with anything, Sheldon replies, "It was a desperate attempt to introduce an alternate topic of conversation." As his friends respond to Leonard's conversation and introduce their own topics, Sheldon complains, "You know, I try very hard to make our lunch hours educational and informative, but your insistence on talking about your own lives stymies me at every turn" ("The Apology Insufficiency").

Sheldon displays other characteristics often associated with autism, although outside of the *DSM* qualifications. He is tremendously intelligent; indeed, he was a child prodigy. On several occasions he mentions that he was only eleven years old when he began college. He also possesses an eidetic memory and can recall even the most mundane details from years ago. Despite his remarkable intelligence, however, Sheldon cannot drive a car. His friends try to get him to learn, but their attempt is a disaster. Sheldon even goes so far as to suggest that he is too highly evolved for driving ("The Euclid Alternative"). He does not like people to touch him; though that aversion is probably rooted in a greater concern for his health than it is an anxiety associated with social, physical contact. Still, when his friend Amy hugs him, he likens the experience to being "strangled by a boa constrictor." After that hug, though, Sheldon analyzes his disdain for physical contact to his friends, "All my life, I have been uncomfortable with the sort of physical contact that comes easilly to others—hand shaking, hugging, prostate

exams—but I'm working on it." He then concludes that he may welcome more physical intimacy in the future ("The Cooper/Kripke Inversion").

Diagnosis Status

There have been subtle hints from other characters at various points in the series that strongly suggest that something about Sheldon is not "normal," that he is disabled in some way. For instance, in one episode Sheldon breaks into an arcade to perform an experiment. The security guard calls Leonard and promises he will be lenient in Sheldon's case, explaining he has a nephew who is "special." This, of course, is the "polite" way that non-disabled people often refer to those with disabilities. Leonard replies, "Well, he's extra-special" ("The Einstein Approximation"), which could be read that Sheldon is disabled in ways that the security guard cannot imagine. Sheldon's friend Amy, a neuroscientist, informs Sheldon after hearing his door-knocking ritual that such behavior "is symptomatic of obsessive compulsive disorder." Sheldon rejects her hypothesis, and she accuses him of denial ("The Infestation Hypothesis").

When Sheldon's other friends question his sanity, Sheldon's reply is always the same, "I'm not insane! My mother had me tested!" ("The Griffin Equivalency"), a very vague defense for one's sanity because it leaves several unanswered questions. In what year was he tested? How old was he? Where were the tests conducted? What set of tests were administered? For what disorders was he being tested? What, exactly, was the result (100% neurotypical seems unlikely)? All of these questions are important because the understanding of psychologists, particularly their expertise regarding the autism spectrum, has significantly changed over the years. Whoever "tested" Sheldon certainly

did not have the knowledge of autism that psychologists have today. It is likely that a definitive diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome, for instance, was unavailable at the time Sheldon was tested.Sheldon's mother reveals more about this mystery during a visit. When Leonard calls Sheldon "crazy," she replies, "Actually, I had him tested as a child. Doctor says he's fine," but then she mumbles, "Although I do regret not following up with that specialist in Houston" ("The Rhinitis Revelation"). This unfulfilled second opinion might have led to more concrete answers.

Sheldon actually acknowledges that some of his autistic tendencies make his life more challenging. When his friends investigate and question a mysterious part of his behavior, in which he spends time alone every day, Sheldon does not say what he does, but explains:

> You may not realize it, but I have difficulty navigating certain aspects of daily life, you know, understanding sarcasm, feigning interests in others, not talking about trains as much as I want to. It's exhausting, which is why for twenty minutes a day I like to . . . turn my mind off and do what I need to do to recharge. ("The 43 Peculiarity")

This comment could be seen as a step toward Sheldon claiming his disability as part of an identity. He recognizes that he has challenges, but he has found a way to manage them in a manner that satisfies him.

Behind the Scenes Perspectives

Creators Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady have both been very clear on this matter: Sheldon Cooper is not intended to be a character with Asperger's Syndrome. Prady says

that Sheldon and the other characters are based on real people he knew when he worked as a computer programmer, and those individuals possessed some exceptionally strange traits. However, Prady explains of this group, "Quirks were never challenged—they were simply accepted as a quality of the person. Are these things Asperger's? I don't know" (Collins). Prady also adds that if Asperger's Syndrome was intended, he and Chuck Lorre would have stated very specifically from the beginning that this was Sheldon's disorder. Instead, Prady refers to Sheldon's unusual set of behaviors as "Sheldony" (Waldman).

Parsons has a very significant reaction to the possibility of Sheldon having Asperger's Syndrome. In an interview on the National Public Radio show *Fresh Air*, he states:

> I did not know enough about Asperger's to be utilizing any Aspergian traits, as it were, early on. And I still didn't know what it meant exactly to have Asperger's or what those qualities were in a human with that, until we were being asked about midway through the first season after . . . having aired several episodes, you know, "Does Sheldon have Asperger's?" . . . . I went to the writers and asked. They said, "No." And then I began a very slight foray into just researching like, "What is this?" And you know, then I read and was like, "Oh, well, okay, they say he doesn't have Asperger's, and they wrote it so I trust them, but good grief, he certainly has a lot of the traits!"

> So I looked no further into that as far as trying to get any guidance from that. For one reason, whatever they're writing, the way it's being filtered through me and the way I'm doing it apparently is leading us in that direction anyway without having to think about it. Who knew? But the other thing is, and I think they were very smart when they said, "Nope, he doesn't," is that that's not what they wanted to do. You know, not that they ever told me this, but it seems to me it's such an original reaction to the world through a filter like that, to look at the world through those eyes. But . . . I don't think they wanted to saddle us with a responsibility. I don't think they wanted to, I would assume, claim something that we . . . had to make sure we upheld to the letter [of the diagnosis] for ten years, if we're lucky, you know or whatever.
>
> I certainly am relieved, as an actor, that I'm not constantly having to fact check. Look, trying to figure out what . . . the Vulcan salute is every time we do it [is hard enough]. So I can only imagine what I'd be doing going, "Now, is this actually what . . . somebody with Asperger's would do or autism?" So I feel like they've made my life freer in that way by not doing that.

All the same, Parsons certainly seems more convinced of his character's diagnosis than are the writers of *The Big Bang Theory*. It seems that since learning about autism, even if he has not researched the condition extensively, his performance seems to be slightly more autistic. For instance, his struggle with meaningful social connection as opposed to

the more comfortable, controlled structure of routine and isolation is more of a conflict for Sheldon than it was at the beginning of the series.

Autism in general, and Asperger's Syndrome specifically, seem very consistent with the character portrayed in Sheldon Cooper. He overtly and explicitly spells out autistic characteristics even more clearly than do characters that *are* intended to be autistic by their creators in other television shows and films. Sheldon apparently has autism, despite what his writers say, and he is not the only character with autistic characteristics on *The Big Bang Theory*. Sheldon's small circle of academically-oriented friends may not display as many autistic traits as Sheldon does, but they possess enough identifying characteristics to question if they might also belong somewhere on the spectrum. In fact, the only character of the series' central cast who is clearly neurotypical is Penny, which is probably the show's point. This study will investigate the other male characters closely, so it is important to regard their autistic characteristics as well.

Case Study: The Rest of *The Big Bang Theory* Characters

Although Sheldon's roommate Leonard Hofstadter often serves as Sheldon's neurotypical guide to social mores, Leonard often seems just as clueless as Sheldon. In fact, in the show's pilot, Hofstadter may have been intended to be more socially awkward than Sheldon. For instance, when Leonard and Sheldon first meet Penny, Hofstadter decides to do the neighborly thing and invite her to join them for lunch. Yet the way Leonard thinks best to achieve this social objectiveis to hold up a bag of takeout food and to prattle uncomfortably, "Anyway, we brought home Indian food, and I know that moving can be stressful, and I find that when I'm undergoing stress that good food and

company have a comforting effect. Also, curry is a natural laxative, and I don't have to tell you that, you know, a clean colon is just one less thing to worry about!" Sheldon corrects him by saying, "Leonard, I'm no expert here, but I believe in the context of a lunch invitation, you might want to skip the reference to bowel movements." It is only then that Penny understands what Hofstadter is proposing.

There are many occasions when Leonard demonstrates that he is not socially adept. When he eventually secures a date with Penny, just contemplating the possibility that it could lead to a serious relationship causes Leonard to have a panic attack ("The Fuzzy Boots Corollary"). Predictably, Leonard's initial attempt at a romantic relationship with Penny fails. Yet, when a potential rival seeks suggestions from Leonard about how to establish a successful relationship with Penny, Leonard attempts to sabotage the would-be suitor's efforts by advising everything he did that did not work with Penny. Therefore, Hofstadter's advice is rather revealing:

> Well, off the top of my head, you know, I think the most important thing with Penny is to go really slow. I mean, glacial. You know, guys come onto her all the time, so you need to, like, set yourself apart, you know, be a little shy and don't make too much eye contact. Treat her with, like, cool detachment and, you know, fear. Yeah, like you're afraid that if you touch her she'll break. ("The Classified Materials Turbulence")

Leonard's second attempt at a relationship with Penny flourishes for a time, mostly because of Penny's interest in pursuing Leonard and helping him to become, in her words, "quality boyfriend material" ("The Zarnecki Incursion"). Despite her efforts,

however, Leonard still demonstrates apparent, physical manifestations of autism: poor posture, stimming with his fingers, stuttering, and inadequate eye contact. Penny takes particular notice of this last trait and tells her friends that Leonard constantly looks at the ceiling or his shoes ("The Zarnecki Incursion"). One other clue to Leonard's autism is revealed when he confesses to Penny that, as a child, he invented a hugging machine ("The Maternal Capacitance"), which brings to mind Temple Grandin's squeeze machine. However, Leonard did not invent the device because he could not tolerate the sensation of being hugged but because he failed to receive sufficient affection from his parents.

The other two members who comprise the core social group in *The Big Bang Theory* do not display as many autistic traits as Sheldon and Leonard, but they both possess significantly abnormal social deficits. In the first couple of seasons, Howard Wolowitz is overly socially confident and fancies himself a lady-charmer. However, judging from Penny's disgusted response to Howard's continual advances, he is clearly mistaken. Raj, on the other hand, is arguably the most socially disabled. He has selective mutism and cannot speak in the presence of a woman. Raj's problem is more than just an inability to verbalize, however; in the pilot episode when Penny speaks to him, he stiffens his posture and averts his gaze. When Raj wants to say something to Penny, he whispers his comment to Howard, who is his best friend. Howard then expresses for Raj, although usually indirectly by voicing his annoyed response to what Raj wanted to say. However, Raj discovers in "The Grasshopper Experiment" that he is able speak to women if his inhibitions are chemically altered by the effects of alcohol. Therefore, Raj becomes reliant on alcohol to have conversations with Penny or other women. That, of course,

leads to the loss of other inhibitions that usually creates more problems for Raj; he often says and does things under the influence of alcohol that he later regrets.

Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and Raj all exhibit some defining characteristics of autism. Like Sheldon, they share an array of specialized interests. All of them are intellectually gifted, possessing advanced degrees, yet are also painfully socially challenged. Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and Raj regularly interact through working on complex physics equations and concepts, conversing with each other in an elevated vocabulary, and citing actual (but usually rarely known) scientific feats as anecdotes. However, their specialized interests also isolate the four friends and tend to hamper their social development. Even though these characters are, chronologically, probably somewhere in their late twenties, developmentally they act more like adolescents and readily enjoy activities usually associated with young teenagers. The convergence of these incongruent characteristics leads to strange situations, such as passionately arguing the scientific inaccuracies of the first *Superman* movie ("The Big Bran Hypothesis") or hypothesizing about how different the Battle of Gettysburg would have been if it had involved supernatural characters from fantasy, comic books, and mythology ("The Hamburger Postulate"). Also, usually when these four characters discuss their specialized interests, they tend to ignore completely the rest of their environment. In one episode, the four work together to design and install a new media center for Penny. Though Penny insists that she can manage the project herself, Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and Raj tell her not to interrupt. As a result, Penny says something shocking, hoping to

get their attention, but the four are so focused on their work that they do not even hear her ("The Big Bran Hypothesis").

Another trait that is common to these four "nerds" is an inability to interpret adequately social cues in order to "read people." One episode where this ineptitude places them at a distinct disadvantage is "The Dead Hooker Juxtaposition." A new upstairs neighbor, Alicia, uses her beauty and charm to get whatever she wants from Leonard, Howard, and Raj. Only Penny sees what Alicia is doing, probably because she has used similar tactics. However, as Penny has become more familiar with the four friends, she understands that such tactics employed to manipulate them are unfair and particularly unkind. She tells Alicia, "Leonard and Howard and Raj, they aren't like other guys. They're special. Let's see, how can I explain this? They don't know how to use their shields . . . . You know how guys like this are, so please don't take advantage of them." Penny's point does illuminate how difficult it is for all four of *The Big Bang Theory's* main characters to recognize subversive social behavior. Each member of the male ensemble experiences difficult moments as a result of misreading another person. Leonard is probably the most susceptible to this problem because of his relationship with Penny. After their first official date, Leonard announces to his friends, "That woman across the hall is into me!" but Sheldon, Howard, and Raj produce video evidence to demonstrate that Leonard's prospects are not optimistic ("The Bad Fish Paradigm"). Howard often misreads Penny as well. He believes that her consistent rebuffs to his innuendos are merely part of the courtship process; he describes their exchanges as "the carnal repartee, the erotic to and fro." However, in one episode, Penny lashes out at

Howard and bluntly tells him exactly how she feels about his attempts at seduction. She informs Howard that she is completely uninterested in any sort of intimate relationship with him, either now or in the future. Howard replies in shock, "Wait a minute, this isn't flirting. You're serious!" ("The Killer Robot Instability"). Raj misreads Howard's fiancée Bernadette (Melissa Rauch). When Raj expresses his dismay about being unlucky in love, Bernadette simply tries to lift Raj's spirits by making the observation that he is attractive. Raj, however, believes that Bernadette is attracted to him, and he maintains a secret infatuation with her ("The Thespian Catalyst"). Once she finds out about Raj's feelings, Bernadette confronts him angrily. Raj explains that he thought she was interested in him because she was so nice to him; "I'm nice to *everyone*!" she shouts ("The Skank Reflex Analysis"). Though Sheldon is more verbal about his difficulty to understand people's nonverbal expressions, the others clearly have trouble in this area as well.

The creators of *The Big Bang Theory* have not addressed autism in any of the other characters, but it can be assumed that since they are so adamant that Sheldon does not have the disorder, they would probably say the same about the rest of the characters. However, Prady and Lorre should reconsider this position because the huge impact of autistic characteristics make this comedy as entertaining as it is. This study needs to consider more characters from *The Big Bang Theory* than Sheldon Cooper alone, particularly Leonard Hofstadter, Howard Wolowitz, and Rajesh Koothrappali, because they all contribute. They not only share many of the same autistic traits, but they also offer commentary on the nature of friendships and romantic relationships with autistic

people and neurotypical people. Also, the metaphors and themes this study will propose have more of an impact when this ensemble is together. This band of "nerds" represents a particularly bright bandwidth of the spectrum.

***Boston Legal*, 2004-2008, Created by David E. Kelley**

This show follows the many bizarre litigations that come through the fictional Boston law firm of Crane, Poole, and Schmidt. Though most of the cases are out of the ordinary, comical, and controversial, the focus of the show is more about the (often scandalous) relationships of the lawyers in the firm. Yet most of the spotlight is pointed toward the friendship of senior partner Denny Crane (William Shatner) and the main hotshot lawyer Alan Shore (James Spader). The character on which this study focuses was introduced in a subplot three-episode arc in the show's second season, but he returned as a regular part of the supporting cast.

Jerry Espenson, Performed by Christian Clemenson

It might be useful in this character's case to summarize pertinent portions of Espenson's overall storyline since he is a supporting character with a definite, unique scenario. Jerry is first introduced as a lawyer who specializes in banking and finance in the episode "Legal Deficits." Alan consults with him to help his assistant who is having trouble with credit card debt. This episode solidifies Jerry's character as a particularly intelligent but eccentric lawyer; Denny calls Jerry "Hands" because of the way Jerry paces with his hands placed flat against his thighs.

In the next episode, "The Cancer Man Can," Jerry approaches Alan asking for a favor. Espenson is up for a partnership in the firm for his third and final time, and he

wants to know how much of a chance he has. Alan convinces Denny to show him Jerry's performance evaluation, which reads that Jerry has poor social skills and does not fit in with the team. Another partner, Shirley Schmidt (Candice Bergman), tells Jerry that partners are expected to be active socially in order to bring in clients. Alan continues to argue that Jerry deserves the partnership because of all the dedicated work he has put into his job and states that it is unfair to deny Jerry the opportunity to join the partnership just because he is awkward and different. Despite all of Alan's efforts, Jerry does not get the partnership. Shirley tells Jerry that though his work had been thorough, it is not enough. Jerry stews over her statement on his way out, then passes by a party celebrating his rival who did receive a partnership election. Jerry joins them and cuts bigger and bigger pieces of cake, each time looking at Shirley and asking her if it is enough. When she tries to answer him, he runs up to her and holds the cake knife to her throat and threatens to kill her if he is not made partner. Alan helps to calm Jerry, saying that he does want to see the most gifted legal mind he has ever known to have his life wasted in jail over one emotional outburst. Jerry agrees to let Shirley go if Alan will represent him. Once Jerry is arrested, Shirley says to Alan, "I assume it's clear to you now why we couldn't make Jerry partner."

The final episode of the arc, "Helping Hands," demonstrates the depth of Jerry's disability. Alan tries to convince him that a plea bargain is his best chance, but Jerry refuses a plea because he fears that he will be disbarred, telling Alan that his love of practicing law is all he has. Alan sees that Jerry's only real chance is to prove temporary insanity, which he knows is not going to be easy. He argues in court that it was unfair of

the firm to lead Jerry to believe that he could make partner even though it is written in his file that he was not partnership material, but that does not seem to be a compelling enough argument. Then Alan consults a psychologist, relating to him all of Jerry's idiosyncracies and shares his performance file. The psychologist responds that Jerry is a "textbook case" of Asperger's Syndrome. Alan shares with Jerry what he has learned, and Jerry reacts with relief, explaining, "I always hated that I couldn't be normal. Turns out, it's because I'm not." Alan says that if Jerry gets an official diagnosis, he could use it as a viable defense; but Jerry refuses, saying that if his condition is made public, no one will hire him. So Alan informs Shirley of the news privately and explains that Jerry is covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act. Therefore, if the firm proceeds with the litigation against him, the whole case will turn into an act of discrimination and Shirley will lose. He proposes that if she dismisses the charges, he will get Jerry psychiatric help; therefore, she does.

Jerry appears later in the season to say that he is getting counseling to improve his social skills and that he has started his own firm ("Ivan the Incorrigible"). He returns at various times in the following season seeking advice from Alan regarding cases Jerry finds difficult. Then on the episode "Guantanamo by the Bay," Jerry returns to Shirley asking if he may come back to work for Crane, Poole, and Schmidt, explaining that the attorneys at her firm are much more socially adept than those on his staff. He puts it this way:

> Most often places, everybody's mired in their computers or BlackBerries, on cell phones, even in the bathrooms. Most exchanges take place by

> email, text message, or IM. It's become such an impersonal universe. Here, everyone is *so* in each other's faces. I realize now it's quite magical . . . . How joyous that you people actually know one another! Could it be any more human? No matter where you look–one's got mad cow, you got the funny one who salutes and does push-ups, there's the transvestite and the girl who loves him, a dwarf who comes and goes, and how to begin to explain Alan? Certainly, you can make room for one lawyer who keeps his hands on his thighs and purrs. And then there's you, who's actually considering rehiring a man who . . . held a serrated cake knife to your throat. Such compassion for forgiveness, that makes you the most human of them all.

Shirley is moved by Jerry's appeal, and she convinces the other senior partners to allow him to return in light of his success.

In the final season, Jerry becomes eligible to make partner again, but the partners still have reservations about his social skills. In the episode "Mad Cows," the partners call his office mate Katie (Tara Summers) for an interview expressing that they feel that Jerry will never fit in with the group, and she berates them for not accepting Jerry. She tells them:

> It's just, when I hear "who we'll feel comfortable with," it brings up ugly overtones. When I look and see an old, white establishment in this room and hear terms like "fitting in," it sounds a bit frightening. Jerry Espenson could quite bring something to this table that might be lacking, better yet

> needed . . . . I was recruited to this firm with the various promises of progressiveness and tolerance. It's a bit demoralizing to see behind all the talk the same old white boys' club plans to do business as usual! I smell discrimination in the dusty air, and I'm not just annoyed; I'm a bit appalled!

Her speech, however, is not well received. The partners then call in Jerry for an interview, and he asks them to accept him based on his values of "humility, graciousness, compassion, all tempered with intelligence." His presentation leaves a favorable impact, and Jerry makes partner. At the series end, he becomes more intimate with Katie, and they kiss in his final scene ("Last Call").

Jerry's most autistic behavior is seen in his many stims and phrases that exhibit echolalia. Such stims include the already noted tendency to place his hands conspicuously on his legs, a behavior shown throughoutthe series. In season two, Jerry also constantly shouts, "Bingo!" to accentuate points in his argument. This behavior does not continue beyond this season, however, because Jerry's therapist evidently works with Jerry to quell it. During his first trial with Alan, Jerry makes a mark after saying his compulsive interjection and explains that he is only allowed eight "bingoes" a day ("Ivan the Incorrigible"). In the next season, however, Jerry acquires new behaviors that persist throughout the series. When he is nervous, he squeaks, and in an effort to control the squeaking, he hops. Sometimes, he makes a growling noise when he is anxious or satisfied. In season four, his behaviors are more verbal than physical. He greets Katie when she first enters his office with, "Hello! Welcome!" Those two words become his

greeting everywhere. In season four, he even uses it when *he* is the guest ("Thanksgiving"). Whenever Katie says "Brilliant!", he immediately mimics her, using an annoying falsetto voice and even imitating her British accent. After an attractive co-worker catches him standing beneath mistletoe and kisses him, Jerry blurts out "LIPS!" every time he sees her. He develops more stims that persist, such as popping his lips and spinning in circles, sometimes even when he is delivering a closing argument at a trial ("Mad About You").

On the other hand, though these odd behaviors are all very noticeable and single Jerry out as being different, there is something else unusual about them. One wonders if "autistic" is the appropriate term for such behaviors. Self-stimulating behavior usually has a definite purpose to calm an autistic person. Most of Jerry's bizarre behaviors do not seem to achieve this purpose, or any other purpose for that matter. Furthermore, Jerry does not always seem to have control over them; sometimes they surprise even him. He once discusses with Katie the possibility that he might also have a mild case of Tourette's Syndrome ("Mad About You"). Perhaps that diagnosis is a more likely explanation for behaviors such as these. Nevertheless, the *DSM* diagnosis does not discuss the reason behind "stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms," so perhaps autism could still be seen as a viable reason behind Jerry's atypical behaviors.

Socialization is obviously a deficit for Jerry. It was the major disabling feature that cost Jerry his partnership the first time; Alan notes to Shirley when reviewing Jerry's file that Jerry does not play golf with other lawyers or go to parties or do anything else to "schmooze" anyone: "He just does his job" ("The Cancer Man Can"). Even when Jerry's

social skills improve, he is only close to a few people, such as Alan and Katie. Still, meaningful socialization is what Jerry very clearly craves, as can be seen in his conversation quoted above with Shirley. Social interaction is something he strongly desires to understand better. Once in the middle of a trial, while sharing a drink with Alan, Jerry appears to be on the brink of tears as he says, “When I was in law school, my dream wasn’t so much the big trial as . . . well, I guess this. Having a drink at the end of the day with co-counsel, battle-weary, rehashing the day, discussing strategy, the whole socialization of lawyering that . . . well, till now, I’ve never experienced. It’s a rich feeling, whatever it is.” Alan responds by calling that feeling by its name, friendship (“On the Ledge”).

Of course, Jerry’s lack of emotional reciprocity is clearly seen when he threatens to take Shirley’s life. His attempts to improve in this department, unfortunately, are usually failures. When he deviates from the standard use of, “Hello! Welcome!” as his greeting, he often acknowledges coworkers with platitudes that do not apply. For instance, in one episode he asks Alan how his family is doing. When Alan responds that he does not have a family, Jerry explains that his courtesies are not to be taken literally (“Guise ‘n Dolls”). Jerry certainly has many pervasive interests and fascinations. The most notable, as mentioned previously, is his interest in the law. Also in season two, he appears to have a fascination with lizards. In “Helping Hands,” Jerry is holding a lizard while consulting with Alan. Alan later calls it Linda, and in Jerry’s office the audience sees that Jerry has multiple lizard paperweights (“Ivan the Incorrigible”). However, that particular fascination is never revisited in the other seasons. Jerry also has an interest in

inanimate objects. In the first episode of season three, he is discovered to have developed a relationship with an inflatable doll. Jerry uses the doll to practice socializing, giving it the name "Patty" and imagining it with a personality, all the while understanding that it is not a real person. Nevertheless, the unusual attachment clearly disturbs Alan, and he does not see it as healthy ("Can't We All Just Get a Lung?").

Certain other traits of Jerry might or might not be attributable to autism, but they are outside "normal" behavior. He is very quickly offended, which adds to his immaturity. During Jerry's "bingo" phase, as he and Alan are having a discussion, Alan says "Bingo!" to show that he agreed with Jerry. Yet, Jerry replies, "Are you making fun of me? You said what I say. That's making fun." Alan tries to justify himself by quoting a lyric from the song "Bingo" ("Legal Deficits"). Jerry displays similarly overly-sensitive behavior when anyone mimics a component of his strange behavior. Also, sometimes Jerry's language is very literal. Once, Alan finds Jerry standing in his office with his head against the wall. When Alan asks Jerry what he is doing, Jerry replies, "I'm standing with my head up against a wall" and will not say why until Alan asks him directly ("Attack of the Xenophobes"). Jerry has a tendency for Freudian slips that usually seem to come out of nowhere but sometimes, as Freud theorized, they reveal what he is really thinking. For example, when interviewing a psychologist who is "follically challenged," Jerry asks, "Will her memory come bald—I mean, back?" ("Lincoln"). Yet, perhaps most notable of Jerry's secondary autistic traits is the fact that Jerry is very immature. His moments of violence are indicative of that, and when he is particularly

annoyed with people he often calls them insulting names, revealing a much younger state of development and set of coping skills.

Behind the Scenes Perspectives

The most significant comments about Jerry Espenson come from the actor himself. In a bonus feature on the *Boston Legal* season three DVD, Christian Clemenson reveals some of his perspectives on portraying his character:

> I auditioned for the show five times before this role came up, and for one reason or another, it wasn't the right role. Everyone was aware that James [Spader] and I have a long-standing friendship. He is literally my oldest, best friend in the world. He pushed heavily for me to be on the show, and this role came up, and it was finally a really good fit. He [Jerry] was described as an eccentric, brilliant lawyer, and I was reading the script and I thought, "I bet this guy has Asperger's! You know, he's socially awkward, he's brilliant, he has exhaustive knowledge on one specific area. That sounds like Asperger's to me." And sure enough . . . eventually, they did let me in on the secret that he had Asperger's. I like to do tons of research, and I started reading as much as I could about it. I never wanted that this be an idealized portrait of someone with Asperger's, that this shows the actual pain and misery that is part of their life–*part* of their life, not all of their life, but part of it. Part of the joy of reading every script is to see what sort of oddities and quirks that David Kelly [the creator of the show] will think of for Jerry, and it becomes almost like an Olympic event

> to see how many can be squeezed into one, single scene . . . . One of my favorite things about playing this character is the interactions with Alan. Through Alan, he's [Jerry] sort of been able to come out of his shell to a degree, and that's been really a beautiful thing to play. Doing drama, it's all about change, and when a character changes, it's a thrilling moment. So many things about this job are just unbelievable to me. Just the fact that I had three episodes with my best, oldest friend in the world, that was enough, but then to win an Emmy on top of that, it's a ridiculous abundance of riches that I'm . . . unbelievably grateful for. It's just such a wonderful, life-affirming experience ultimately, which is what all great art is about. ("Character Witness")

It is significant that Clemenson recognized autistic characteristics of Jerry from his first read through of the script. It is also noteworthy that he recognizes that negative aspects are only *part* of the autistic experience and that he realizes that autistic people do change. It makes one wonder how much knowledge about autism and Asperger's Clemenson may have had before taking this role.

The focal point of the show is the lawyers and how their lives affect each other. The characters are predominately neurotypical people who have a clearer understanding than most neurotypical people about how people ordinarily interact. Not only do they know the law, they know how to influence human thinking and emotion in a case's favor. In the office, one might consider these lawyers to be hyper-social because they form alliances and interact with each other, sometimes in manipulative ways to get what they

want. Jerry Espenson, perhaps, is meant to be a foil who breaks the pattern of the typical attorneys of Crane, Poole, and Schmidt. He has an understanding of the law but lacks the interpersonal knowledge that they, so effectively and effortlessly, wield. Jerry enjoys and desires the "camaraderie" that the lawyers share, but he does not appreciate how self-serving and manipulative they can be. He does not want to be a "cut-throat," "bully" lawyer like other attorneys. Alan Shore teaches him that in order to be an accomplished lawyer, one much take on such a persona ("Ivan the Incorrigible"), but Jerry challenges that reasoning. Even when Jerry attempts to imitate such a devious persona, he invariably reverts to his meek, autistic self, and even Alan has to admit that Jerry is at his best when he acts according to his true self ("Guise 'n Dolls").

Jerry's character is significant because it is one of television's first genuine attempts to portray someone with Asperger's Syndrome. Still, Jerry is not a stereotype. On the other hand, he may not present an entirely accurate impression of Asperger's Syndrome. Jerry's immature outbursts may be too exaggerated, and some of his characteristics may not be truly consistent with Asperger's. One example is that Jerry tells Alan that he is a human lie detector ("On the Ledge"). Since autistic people generally have trouble making eye contact and are usually unable to read facial expressions, it is extremely unlikely that most autistic people, even those with Asperger's, are at all aware that someone is lying.

***Community*, 2009-present, Created by Dan Harmon**

This show mostly focuses on Jeff Winger (Joel McHale), a former lawyer who was disbarred when it was revealed that his law degree was spurious. Seeking a quick

and easy way to attain his desired educational standard, he begins attending Greendale Community College. In the pilot episode, Jeff starts a study session, and a group of very unusual people also attend, including: Britta Perry (Gillian Jacobs), an attractive, female student; Annie Edison (Allison Brie), a very studious young woman recovering from an addiction to prescription drugs; Troy Barnes (Donald Glover), a high school football star who lost his athletic scholarship by seriously injuring himself in a foolish stunt; and Abed Nadir (Danny Pudi), a fast-talker who keeps comparing the group to *The Breakfast Club* and making other random pop culture references. Though Jeff wavers in his dedication to the eclectic study group, they stay together as a family throughout their college career.

Case Study: Abed Nadir, Performed by Danny Pudi

Abed is arguably the most popular character of the series. The audience bonds to him in part because of his endearing, recurring jokes such as performing rap songs composed of Spanish gibberish ("Spanish 101") and co-hosting a mock morning talk show called "Troy and Abed in the Morning" ("The Science of Illusion"). Nearly every episode closes with a skit that runs during the credits, usually featuring Abed and Troy. Though this show has been faltering in ratings and, after taking a hiatus in 2012, is officially "on the bubble," Abed just might be the character who keeps that bubble from popping.

Abed's most autistic feature, his obsessive interest in popular culture, overlaps with several other autistic traits. He constantly compares his experiences and his interactions to television and movies. For instance, in the pilot episode, Jeff gives an inspiring speech to promote unity in the study group, mostly to showcase his leadership

qualities to Britta. Yet almost immediately, when he realizes that Britta is not impressed, Jeff retracts his speech. Abed responds, “You know, I thought you were like Bill Murray in any of his films, but you’re more like Michael Douglas in any of his films!” The show often uses Abed’s humor as a meta-narrative. Abed seems to be the only character who realizes he is on a television show and is, therefore, able to break the fourth wall and to give commentary about *Community* itself.

More importantly however, Abed uses his considerable knowledge of pop culture for another specific purpose: to connect with people and to understand the world around him. One especially complex episode in season one, titled “Contemporary American Poultry,” demonstrates this aspect of Abed’s character very well. The study group hatches a scheme for Abed to work in the school cafeteria in order to reserve for them the cafeteria’s most popular, coveted food, chicken fingers. Abed first imagines himself as the protagonist in a mafia movie and devises an intricate distribution system to give out chicken fingers to everyone in the school in exchange for favors. Jeff then tells Abed that the situation is out of control and to stop the mafia movie. However, Abed replies, “I’m not doing a mafia movie. In fact, I don’t need to use movies or TV shows to talk to people anymore. Before, I only needed them because the day-to-day world made no sense to me, but now everyone’s speaking the same language, chicken. I understand people, and they finally understand me.” Eventually, though, Abed’s system falls apart when the school population tires of chicken fingers. What most upsets Abed at this point is that he, suddenly, is socially estranged from everyone again. He tells Jeff, “Everyone else needs my help. That’s what people don’t get is that . . . they need to get me. I just

need to be able to connect to people like you can, and then I can make everyone happy." So he returns to his pop culture coping mechanism. Abed's interest in pop culture also demonstrates his desire for structure and roles. Part of the reason he looks at life as though it was a television show is that he really wishes life would be like a television show. In one episode, Jeff yells at him to realize that life is nothing like television. Abed answers, "I can tell life from TV, Jeff. TV makes sense. It has structure, logic, rules, and likable leading men. In life, we have this. We have you" ("Anthropology 101").

Abed usually has a vacant expression, as if he is staring out into space. The other characters often notice it as well. For instance, when they are gathered to hold a surprise birthday party for Abed, Annie urges the others to just imagine the look on his face when the party begins; another student notes that such an expression is not difficult to imagine because Abed's countenance is always the same ("Critical Film Studies"). Yet, sometimes Abed is able to make eye contact. A scene in season one consists of the members in the study group just looking at each other. Not only is Abed excellent at eye contact in this scene, but every time a character meets his gaze, he grins and wiggles his eyebrows ("Romantic Expressionism").

Abed is very likeable, and his universe of friends is fairly large. However, Abed is not involved in a romantic relationship because he unaccustomed to approaching women in an amorous way. Instead, Abed is dedicated to his friendship with the study group, especially Troy. He would do anything to keep that friendship going, including modifying his personality. He explains it to the group like this:

> Everybody wants me to be happy. Everybody wants to help me. But usually when they find out they can't, they get frustrated and stop talking to me, or they trick me into buying them ice cream and then shove me in a clothes dryer, which I didn't want to happen with you guys, so I wanted to make sure you felt you could help me. The truth is, lots of girls like me, because, let's face it, I'm pretty adorable, and my aloofness unconsciously reminds them of their fathers. So, I'm more used to them approaching me . . . . That's why I was willing to change for you guys, because when you really know who you are and what you like about yourself, changing for other people isn't such a big deal. ("Physical Education")

Yet some of what Abed does for the group gets him into trouble, and sometimes his behavior is socially inappropriate in the interest of maintaining his friendships. For example, when Abed notices that he is having most difficulty understanding the female members of the study group, he studies them by keeping a journal to track their behavior. He notices that there is a definite change in the women's behavioral pattern during certain periods of the month, and then it occurs to him why. With this epiphany, he continues keeping the journal, only this time noting those times of the month in order to compensate by modifying his own behavior. When the women discover what he is doing, they feel violated, disgusted, and angry ("Cooperative Calligraphy").

In another instance, these same young women encourage Abed to note all the physical flaws of certain other girls whom they perceive to be their rivals. Abed is not sure about this request because he has been taught that focusing on another's

imperfections is rude, but his friends reassure him that such behavior is acceptable when it is done to "bad girls." So Abed continues to insult these rivals because he knows that the women in his study group enjoy it. Yet when Abed notices that his friends toss out the same kinds of insults about girls who are total strangers, he decides that his friends are cruel and insults them as well. The behavior becomes overwhelming, and Abed ends up more alienated than ever. He allows his adversaries to criticize him with a particular insult, "You don't have feelings . . . you [acted unkindly] to fit in, and no matter how hard you try, you never will." He acknowledges to his friends that the statement had a lot of truth to it, and he stops ("Aerodynamics of Gender").

Abed's social and emotional reciprocity is better than most of the other autistic characters in this study. He understands the study group very well because he analyzes them as he would television characters and can accurately predict their behavior. This becomes evident when he posts short films online about the study group that depict actual scenarios they experience long before they experience them, causing his friends to wonder if he has psychic abilities ("Debate 109"). Yet there are other instances involving social and emotional reciprocity where Abed falters. One episode in season two takes place entirely in the study room as the group searches for a missing pen. Abed identifies this installment by television terminology, a "bottle episode," in which all the action happens on one set. Abed expresses his discomfort of being in such a situation by saying that he feels "entombed alive in a mausoleum of feelings I can neither understand nor reciprocate" ("Cooperative Calligraphy"), a statement which shows he actually has

trouble connecting with his friends because he does not always understand their emotions.

In addition, there are some aspects of social etiquette Abed fails to follow. In one episode, Troy, who is African American, takes advantage of Abed's misunderstanding of sarcasm and tells Abed that he is related to Barack Obama. Abed believes him and repeats this information to his other friends. Embarrassed, Troy explains to Abed that he was "messing with" him. In response, Abed conducts an elaborate ruse to convince Troy that he is, in fact, an alien from outer space, including writing in a fabricated language and running around campus making strange noises. Troy does not fall for Abed's act, but Abed's behavior does disturb Troy, and he asks Abed to stop. Abed, however, argues, "But this is what friends do." Troy answers, "From now on, Abed, friends *don't* mess with each other" ("Advanced Criminal Law").

Abed possesses a few other behaviors that might be classified as autistic. He does not have many communication issues, except for the unusual speed of his delivery and the repeated use of his catchphrase, saying the word "cool" three to five times, which could perhaps be interpreted as echolalia. There is one instance where he may have demonstrated hyperlexia. Abed is Muslim, but to understand another student's devotion to Christianity, he reads the entire New Testament in one sitting ("Messianic Myths and Ancient Peoples"). Abed's behavior is generally childish for his age, but this developmentally delayed behavior is also encouraged by his friends, especially Troy.

Finally, it is very clear that Abed has a vivid imagination. The second season's Christmas episode is told entirely from Abed's point of view, and it mimics exactly the

whimsical, classic, stop-motion Christmas specials by Rankin and Bass. The reason for the animation is that it is comforting to Abed, who delves into his imagination as a coping mechanism when he learns that his estranged mother is not coming to visit him for Christmas ("Abed's Uncontrollable Christmas"). Throughout the third season, when Abed gets his own off-campus apartment, another element that demonstrates his vivid imagination is introduced. There is an empty room in his apartment which has walls, ceiling, and floor that are black with an orange grid, exactly like the Holodeck from the latter *Star Trek* series appeared when it was not in use. Abed, however, calls it "the Dreamatorium," and he and his roommate Troy go into that room to reenact scenes from their favorite television shows.

Diagnosis Status

The show's position on whether or not Abed is autistic has been rather inconsistent, but it seemed to be rather clear in the first season. In the pilot episode, after Abed compares Jeff to Michael Douglas, Jeff snaps back at him, "Yeah? Well, you have Asperger's!" Annie gasps in horror, but Troy immaturely giggles at the offensive-sounding name. Abed meanwhile whispers, "What does that mean?", indicating that he is officially undiagnosed. However, the assumption that Abed has Asperger's Syndrome persists throughout this season. Abed directs a movie about his parents' divorce, and the implication seems to be that his mother left because she could not bond with Abed because of his disability ("Introduction to Film"). Later in the season, Abed's diagnosis is again hinted. Annie exclaims, "This is so romantic! It's just like *The Notebook,* except instead of Alzheimer's, Abed has (another character clears her throat, Annie ends

bashfully) someone who likes him" ("Physical Education"). In this quotation, one can assume that she is about to say "Asperger's" but changes her mind to keep from offending another character.

Yet in later seasons, the characters retract this implication. In season two, Abed is identified by a narrator as "undiagnosable" ("Advanced Dungeons and Dragons"). In season three, in order to obtain a partnership from someone in the study group, Abed tells his assigned lab partner that he *might* have a developmental disorder. Meanwhile, Jeff tells his assigned lab partner that he *does* have a developmental disorder and mimics Abed's mannerisms ("Competitive Ecology"). Later in the season, Britta discovers in a profile for her psychology class that one member of the group is psychologically unbalanced. Yet, Jeff points out that she entered the Scantron sheets for the test upside down, which reveals that everyone in the group is insane except for one person. It is revealed in the episode's conclusion that the one sane member of the study group is Abed ("Horror Fiction in Seven Spooky Steps"). This may have been intended to be a respectful comment about autism.

Abed himself has made some significant comments regarding his pending diagnosis. One statement appears in a scene that was cut from the show that aired but is available in the extended version on the season one DVD. While drunk, Abed announces, "I am a Newton in a world of fantasy. I'm high functioning" ("Communication Studies"). High-functioning is a term often applied to Asperger's Syndrome or other verbal disorders on the autism spectrum. It is also worth noting that Sir Isaac Newton has been speculated to be on the spectrum, though such a comment will

never be conclusive since it is posthumous. Abed might be implying in this quotation that he has been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. On the other hand, in season three while rapping he says of himself, “On the spectrum, none of your business” (“Regional Holiday Music”).

Behind the Scenes Perspectives

Dan Harmon, the creator of the show, is rather clear about his intention for Abed’s function in this situation comedy. He describes his objective in the DVD commentary for the pilot episode:

> I would say he is like Mr. Spock or like Data . . . he serves that same purpose, but . . . he does so much more in that with who he is. He’s such a complete character, not that those guys were not in any way, but those guys were amazing, but he really serves that and there’s nothing like him on television . . . . Abed in this pilot, he’s the character that’s most excited about the pilot, and the reason he’s excited about it is because he’s never been able to function as a member of a family because . . . all he knows is media. So really what it is is, Abed’s sort of like he’s, I don’t know, you almost want to call it “playing dumb” in these earlier stages. As he starts to reveal more and more about himself, get more comfortable with people, he starts to reveal that he’s like Snoopy in “Peanuts.” He has this other worldly power because he’s so on the ball in different, internal ways.

Harmon also admits that Abed is in part based on a real person who he knows. Harmon describes this person during the commentary for “Advanced Criminal Law,” especially

concerning how this individual believes anything he is told, even if the information is ludicrous. This person was so close to Abed's personality that he even tried out for Abed's part. It is possible that this real person is on the spectrum.

However, when directly discussing Abed's potential disorder, Harmon becomes a bit more evasive, noting during the commentary for "Physical Education":

> I'm not saying that anybody on this show as a character is diagnosable with any particular condition, but I am proud of the fact that there is a certain community of people who do have a certain developmental disability who watch the show and who love Abed for very specific reasons, and the thing they like about him is that he's not R2-D2. He's not to be pitied. He's . . . adorable. He's, in his own way, flawed but also . . . the coolest guy in the room in a lot of ways that it causes him a lot of problems in other ways. I'm really, really happy that that particular group of people watch [sic] the show that closely and identifies with the character . . . . Abed's a very unique guy no matter what. He's not going to follow some list of symptoms of anything.

This curious statement does not say if Abed is autistic or not, though it seems to suggest that he is not. It is also unclear to which group Harmon is referring, though one would assume he means the autism community, perhaps specifically to people on the higher end of the spectrum. Yet Harmon's statement still causes one to wonder: if Abed is not autistic, what statement did the writers try to make by suggesting this possibility in the pilot? Much like Sheldon Cooper's case, however, insightful comments expressed in the

autism community (and perhaps beyond that), particularly in comments on social media websites, demonstrate that the small but devoted audience of this show remain largely convinced that Abed is autistic. Evidently, this persistence has led Harmon to wonder if even he, himself, may be autistic, which he illustrates when he jokes about the possibility in his DVD commentary of "Abed's Uncontrollable Christmas." Abed is significant because he is more likeable than some other autistic characters in this study. He demonstrates that autistic people can be worthwhile companions and can make significant contributions to a group. He has offered some very profound messages regarding autism in his performance.

***Monk*, 2003-09, Created by Andy Breckman**

Monk is a mystery series with a lot of back-story that is essential to understanding the narrative. Adrian Monk (Tony Shalhoub) is known as the most brilliant detective in the history of San Francisco. When his wife Trudy was killed with a car bomb, Adrian, who was already psychologically delicate, had a nervous breakdown. As a result of his mental problems, Monk lost his badge, and he was not emotionally able to leave his house for three years. Police Captain Leland Stottlemeyer (Ted Levine) was worried about his friend and sent a nurse named Sharona Fleming (Bitty Schram) to care for Monk, and she eventually convinces Monk to start working again as a police consultant. Monk is still psychologically fragile, and he has developed numerous phobias, but his keen observation skills help close seemingly impossible cases. Monk has two goals he wants to achieve: to get reinstated to the police force and to solve Trudy's murder. Halfway through season three, Sharona moves away, and Monk hires Natalie Teeger

(Traylor Howard) in her place. Natalie is not a nurse, but she is widowed and can, therefore, empathize with Monk. Monk's symptoms are pervasive and profound, perhaps more so than any other character under discussion here. That is perhaps because his character is intended to have a disability, and the fact that he has a disability, in part, drives the narrative. Furthermore, since this show is considered to be a comedy, it could be that Monk's "abnormal traits" are over-emphasized in order to be comedic. Monk's intended disability is not an autism spectrum disorder, but many traits of autism are definitely displayed.

Case Study: Adrian Monk, Performed by Tony Shalhoub

As a general rule, Monk does have good eye contact, but sometimes he has been reprimanded for having poor eye contact ("Mr. Monk and the Other Woman"). His eye contact is worst when he sees something that triggers one of his many phobias. For instance, when he goes to Las Vegas, he has trouble questioning a showgirl because of a fear of nudity. He either turns away or looks at the ceiling while addressing her, and when she demands that he make eye contact with him, he shields his eyes so that he can only see her face ("Mr. Monk Goes to Vegas"). Monk also displays an inexpressive facial expression, but the explanation given for this demeanor is Monk's inability to overcome the grief that has overwhelmed him after Trudy's death.

Monk is not always good at discerning non-verbal cues. For instance, once while shopping together at a store, Natalie, with her hands full of grocery bags, stands at the door and looks at Monk as though asking him to open the door for her. Monk does not understand, so she struggles to open the door by herself ("Mr. Monk Gets Cabin Fever").

On the other hand, sometimes Monk has a remarkable ability to read facial expressions, but those times seem to be rare moments of intuition that even he cannot explain. For instance, as Monk and Sharona are listening to an interview with a baseball player who had dated the murder victim in the case they were investigating, even though the discussion was only about the baseball player's athletic performance, Monk whispers to Sharona, "He loved her." When Sharona asks how he could tell, Monk just shrugs ("Mr. Monk Goes to the Ballgame"). Most of the time, however, Monk gathers his information by regarding inanimate objects at the crime scene.

Monk clearly has social deficits and does not know how to socialize, though he deeply desires friendship and acceptance. As a child, Monk bought all the records of the most popular music artists, but since his family did not have a record player, he never listened to them. He bought the albums just hoping to "fit in" ("Mr. Monk and the Three Pies"). Apparently, it was only through great fortune that his wife found him, and Monk still is baffled that she chose him because she was much more social than he ("Mr. Monk and the Class Reunion"). Sometimes Monk really tries to connect with people in order to make friends, such as in the episode "Mr. Monk Goes to the Office." In this episode, Monk works undercover at an office because the chance to be a "drone" like "everybody else" excites him. Monk takes on extra jobs and busy work, and he is quickly liked by his co-workers for doing jobs that no one else wants to do. He goes with them to lunch and talks and laughs with them, feeling beside himself that he has "a gang." However, their friendship suddenly cools when Monk's idiosyncrasies become manifest. His co-

workers begin to reject him, and Monk hears them giggling behind his back as he leaves the office for the last time.

Though his ability to associate with his peers is weak, probably Monk's greatest social deficit is his lack of social and emotional reciprocity. The show keeps coming back to Monk's struggle with empathy. The first episode that really delves into this topic is "Mr. Monk Goes to the Circus." Sharona confesses to Monk that she is afraid of elephants, and he laughs at her and tells her to "suck it up." Sharona is tremendously offended at this comment, telling him, "You have thousands of phobias and quirks that I have to deal with every single day, and I am always there for you . . . and now I just have one tiny, little problem, and you have the nerve to tell me to suck it up? Don't you have any compassion? You're the most selfish, inconsiderate man I have ever met." Though Monk tries to apologize in several ways, Sharona will not accept his apologies and refuses to cooperate with him. Monk fails to see why she is upset, as demonstrated by this session with his psychologist Dr. Kroger (Stanley Kamel):

> Monk: She's still not talking to me. She says I don't get it.
>
> Dr. Kroger: Well, I think maybe she's right.
>
> Monk: What don't I get? I don't understand.
>
> Dr. Kroger: I can't tell you that.
>
> Monk: You mean . . . you know, but you won't tell me?
>
> Dr. Kroger: Adrian, you're going to have to figure this one out for yourself.

> Monk: I'm sorry; I want to make sure I understand this. I have a problem. You know the answer.
>
> Dr. Kroger: That's right.
>
> Monk: And I'm paying you.
>
> Dr. Kroger: That's right.
>
> Monk: But you won't tell me.
>
> Dr. Kroger: That's right. Adrian, the answer is inside you.
>
> Monk: No, doctor, the answer is inside *you*! If you told me, I would hear it, and then the answer would be inside *me*!

Just after the appointment, Monk tells Sharona's son to help his mother, saying, "Let's give her a break." Sharona is very impressed with that and tells him, "That was empathy. That means you're thinking about how I felt. I think you're getting it." When Monk understands this, he works to comfort her and helps to cure her fear of elephants. In fact, by the end of the episode, Sharona starts wondering if Monk is becoming too empathetic.

However, Monk still has difficulty with empathy when he meets Natalie. In "Mr. Monk Gets Stuck in Traffic," they are in a minor wreck, Natalie hurt her wrist, but Monk loudly moans and complains that the pen in his pocket broke and is staining his shirt. They have a similar conversation later in the episode:

> Monk: Why didn't you tell me you were hurt? . . . . You know, I would've found a doctor for you.
>
> Natalie: Mr. Monk, you didn't even ask how I was. It didn't even occur to you. All you cared about was a stupid ink stain on your shirt!

Monk: I was busy. I talked to the patrolman.

Natalie: I'm sure you were talking because I know you weren't listening. You never listen to anyone. You're just lost in your own world. Mr. Monk, this is a dangerous job. What if I am ever in real trouble? Are you going be there for me?

Monk: I'll be there.

Natalie: See, I don't believe you. It's a two-way street, Mr. Monk. We have to look out for each other.

Monk: I'll be there.

And he proves it. When Natalie is in danger, he faces his fears to save her. When she asks him how he managed to do that, he only answers, "Two-way street." Yet the way Monk continues to treat Natalie suggests that he does not really understand empathy. Though Natalie is Monk's assistant, he treats her more like his slave. He expects her to see to all his needs, and he also has her carry everything. In fact, Monk gives little thought to Natalie's immense contribution to their partnership. Natalie, however, rarely complains and allows Monk's mistreatment.

The last major episode that deals with Monk's difficulty with empathy is "Mr. Monk on Wheels." Natalie feels guilty for letting a bicycle thief go free, so she asks Monk to help her catch him. When Monk refuses, saying that he has "some dignity left," Natalie tells him that she is "cashing in" her "karma chips" for all the personal favors she has done for him. On the rounds to find this thief, Monk gets shot in the leg and blames Natalie for his injury. She agrees to help him while he is wheelchair bound. She asks if

he is hungry for anything, and he replies that he wants "a nice, big bowl of karma chips with some guacamole." He works Natalie to exhaustion, and whenever she says she is getting too tired to help him anymore, he acts even more pitiful. Stottlemeyer lectures Monk that if he continues to take out all his pain on Natalie, she will quit. Yet it is not until Natalie is in her worst state, when she is completely devoid of energy, that Monk realizes what he is doing to her. He apologizes and asks Natalie to hold out her hands. When she does, he mimics putting something in her hands saying he is giving her back all her karma chips. Yet, he admits that the apology was a difficult sacrifice for him to make. At the end of the episode, when he is accidently shot in the other leg, Monk keeps asking Natalie for chips, as though he has really learned nothing at all.

Monk also has deficits in communication and has great difficulty initiating conversations. Sometimes when he wants to talk to people, he relies on note cards that he has collected regarding various topics. Usually, the notes written on those cards are statistics that are really common knowledge ("Mr. Monk Goes to the Office"). Monk usually has trouble being assertive. If someone does not wish to continue talking to him, even if what Monk has to say regards an important topic, such as a raise, he considers the conversation over and leaves. Natalie usually has to pull him back to try again ("Mr. Monk and the Big Reward"). He sometimes repeats himself when he is very agitated or upset, and sometimes he parrots other people.

Perhaps as far as communication is concerned, Monk's greatest deficit is his inability to grasp humor. One case involved a radio "shock jock" disk jockey who interviews Monk on the air. Monk does not understand that the disk jockey and all his

cohorts are mocking him. Monk later tells Natalie that he could never understand humor, saying, "It's like a blind spot. It's like everybody else in the world can speak another language that I can never learn" ("Mr. Monk is On the Air"). Similarly, Monk often has a problem understanding when people are speaking figuratively:

> Stottlemeyer: Don't you ever get tired of being right?
>
> Monk: I do feel tired, more fatigued, really. I don't know if it's from being right.
>
> Stottlemeyer: It was a rhetorical question, Monk. ("Mr. Monk and the Election")

Because of his disorder, Monk has many rituals and strict patterns of behavior. His areas of intense interest probably contribute to his wealth of knowledge. Some of Monk's interests include: his wife, rocks (particularly rock tumbling), Willie Nelson, and anything associated with his fear of germs. One episode focuses on a fascination that Monk has had from his youth, an interest in a 70's sitcom called *The Cooper Clan.* He becomes tremendously excited when one of the child actors from the show releases a "tell-all" book. When the same actor receives death threats, Monk agrees to protect her, but he has trouble separating the real person from her character. When he reads the book and sees how dysfunctional she is in real life, he is absolutely devastated, and he learns to get past his fascination ("Mr. Monk's Favorite Show").

Monk engages in several ritualistic behaviors, particularly when he is at home. He habitually stays up late and cleans in a specific way. When Stottlemeyer stays with Monk, he realizes how exact Monk is about his space. After Stottlemeyer vacuums the

living room, Monk vacuums it again. Monk explains that the lines that the vacuum cleaner left on the carpet when Stottlemeyer vacuumed are diagonal; Monk prefers them to be straight. In the same episode, Stottlemeyer keeps pushing the coffee table so that it is straight, but each time Monk moves it back into its original place ("Mr. Monk and the Very, Very Old Man"). Monk also has difficulty with change. In one episode, he says, "I have no problem with change. I just don't like to be there when it happens" ("Mr. Monk and the Other Woman"). Once when Monk breaks a lamp, he has to buy another one exactly like it, as well as three backups ("Mr. Monk and the Billionaire Mugger"). He also strictly adheres to rules, for instance, refusing to ride with a taxi driver who has an expired inspection sticker, even when the driver promises he will have it renewed the following day ("Mr. Monk and the Big Reward").

Monk displays a number of stims throughout the series, most of which involve cleaning or straightening objects, and he often touches lamps and poles. Monk actually uses one stim to his advantage while he works. As he investigates a crime scene, he slowly walks around the space and spreads his hands in front of him. Somehow by doing this, he is able to make observations more easily. He explains on a documentary that sometimes he does not even realize that he is holding his hands in that peculiar way, but it helps him block out distractions ("Mr. Monk's 100th Case"). Monk is, of course, tremendously intelligent, and it is that intelligence that makes him so good at his job. His memory is nothing short of amazing, but it seems to be more than an eidetic memory; he cannot forget anything. He can remember every car that passes him on the highway

("Mr. Monk Gets Stuck in Traffic") and every person he has ever met ("Mr. Monk is Up All Night").

Monk displays several other traits often associated with autism, including a hypersensitivity to stimuli. His skin is so sensitive to touch that when someone writes on a paper placed against his back, he can tell what that person wrote ("Mr. Monk and the Class Reunion"). Many of his phobias and rituals may be associated with stimuli sensitivity. For instance, his obsession with cleanliness is challenged when the San Francisco garbage workers go on strike. Monk is unable to do his detective work effectively because the stench of the trash greatly affects his concentration ("Mr. Monk and the Garbage Strike"). One of Monk's odd behaviors is that he separates his food onto separate plates, presumably because he cannot handle the textures or tastes of the food when they mix together. Additionally, Monk does have some physical limitations. He cannot drive; when he tries to drive, he runs Sharona's car into a pole ("Mr. Monk Goes to the Carnival"). He has problems with fine motor skills, but he is a perfectionist. Therefore, he does many simple tasks, such as writing his name, extremely slowly and starts over if he makes the smallest mistake.

Diagnosis Status and Behind the Scenes Perspectives

The show advertised while it was running that Adrian Monk had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). For example, the jacket on the season three DVD reads "Obsessive. Compulsive. Detective." Andy Breckman and the writers work with that perspective in mind as well, judging from their DVD features. OCD, however, does not explain Monk's social or communication deficits. In fact, in one episode in which Monk

is prescribed medication to treat his obsessive compulsive behaviors, he still is unable to connect with anyone socially, even though he believes to the contrary, which clearly indicates that Monk's condition is more than OCD ("Mr. Monk Takes His Medicine"). Since obsessive compulsive behavior is part of an autism diagnosis, an autism spectrum disorder better accounts for the total behavior displayed by Monk.

On the show, however, the matter of diagnosis is left open. There are a few hints about Monk's condition, but no character ever says directly that Monk has OCD. In the pilot episode, when asked what is wrong with Monk, Sharona replies, "It's a form of anxiety disorder. A severe case like this is usually triggered by a single, traumatic incident." It is true that OCD is classified as an anxiety disorder and autism is a developmental disorder. However, as the show continues, we learn that Monk has had these tendencies all his life, and Trudy's death made them worse. A little later in season one, an observer notes that Monk has "classic obsessive compulsive tendencies." Sharona confirms that to a degree by saying, "How did you know that?" ("Mr. Monk and the Other Woman"). Still, that is an observation of his tendencies, not a suggestion of a diagnosis; it is not clear if this outsider stands by that opinion when she gets to know Monk better. On the series' one-hundredth episode, as part of a documentary about Monk, his rival Harold Krenshaw is interviewed, and a title comes on the screen that identifies Krenshaw as a "Fellow OCD Patient" ("Mr. Monk's 100th Case"). However, this could mean that Harold has OCD, not necessarily Monk; they were fellow patients because they temporarily shared a therapist. Still, no one on the show overtly states that Monk has OCD, not his assistants, not his friends, not his therapists, not even Monk

himself. The most Monk says about his disorder is his mantra throughout the series, "It is a gift and a curse." That can describe most any unusual condition, but it is certainly very true for autism.

There is one episode, however, which strongly addresses the question as to whether Monk's condition constitutes a disability. In "Mr. Monk and the Missing Granny," a law student hires Monk promising him to get him reinstated to the police department in lieu of payment. She tells Monk that all he must do is sue the police department for discrimination according to the Americans with Disabilities Act and take a test to prove he has all of his faculties. Something about this troubles Monk greatly, and after hearing the plan, he turns to Sharona and asks, "Am I disabled?" However, when he takes the test, Monk's perfectionism and problems with fine motor skills prevent him from even filling in the first bubble on the answer sheet. Stottlemeyer says that he believes Monk failed the test on purpose because he did not desire to get his badge back with a technicality. This situation could be read in many ways, but perhaps Monk does not recognize himself as disabled. It seems odd that Monk is uncomfortable seeing himself as disabled because he does not like to be perceived as "normal." For instance, Natalie once says to him, "You're only human," and he sharply replies, "There's no need for name calling!" ("Mr. Monk and His Biggest Fan"). The former scene could be a negative comment about disability, or it might be the writers' way of saying that disability is not the main focus of the show. At any rate, it does seem to contribute to the way the audience regards Monk's disorder.

Tony Shalhoub's interpretation of Monk sounds more like a description of autism or Asperger's Syndrome than OCD:

> I was drawn to this idea that he's heroic but he's not invulnerable. A lot of heroes in movies and television . . . make no missteps. They can handle any situation. They're good at everything. They're good at shooting and fighting and romance and all these other things. And I just, I was attracted to this part because there are so many things that Monk isn't good at outside of his job. He's not socially adept. He's kind of out of it, really, when it comes . . . to pop culture, and he's bothered and incapacitated by sometimes the smallest things.
>
> The thing that I think most drew me to this character was that Monk is always having to do two or three things at once. He's trying to read a room or a crime scene, but he's preoccupied with something that might have happened to him earlier in the day or something in the room that's off-kilter or something that he . . . has to look at and has to deal with but that he just might have a phobia about. He's got so many difficulties. His problems are also his strength. His weaknesses are part of what makes him so good at what he does. It's interesting that I met a couple of . . . real-life detectives who say that a lot of people who go into that line of work do have these kinds of tendencies. They sort of gravitate toward this profession because . . . it's all in the detail. It's all in what you see when you enter a room or a crime scene. And you'd be amazed at how much, so

> many of us are like this to varying degrees. We really didn't, at least I didn't, think of that when we were putting this thing together. So it was sort of a happy accident. ("Monk Character Profile")

According to Shalhoub's assessment, many policemen are eccentric and different, like Monk, and they are, perhaps, better for it, which challenge's an expert's opinion which will be discussed in the following chapter. These comments also suggest that everyone has tendencies like these to some degree. The show encourages the audience to embrace that unusual side of Monk, to look beyond the curses of his condition and see the gifts.

CHAPTER 4

"I Can't Just Turn it On and Off Like a Tap.": Autism on Television, Drama

Bones, 2005-present, Created by Hart Hanson

Bones is a mystery series about a team of researchers from the Jeffersonian in Washington, D.C., a museum with a forensics department which aids the FBI in solving murders. The team of investigators is headed by forensic anthropologist Dr. Temperance Brennan (Emily Deschanel), whose specialty is discerning a victim's identity and other vital information about a crime by solely examining skeletal remains. Brennan's FBI partner, Agent Seeley Booth (David Boreanaz), originally held a somewhat cynical impression of the investigative methods employed by Dr. Brennan and her team. He calls Dr. Brennan "Bones" (hence the title of the series) because of her area of expertise, and he refers to her fellow researchers as "squints," which calls to mind the way that they scrutinize every detail while inspecting evidence. The team includes Dr. Camille "Cam" Saroyan (Tamara Taylor), a coroner who manages the team; Dr. Jack Hodgins (TJ Thyne), the "bug and slime guy" who analyzes particulates on the remains; and Angela Montenegro (Michaela Conlin), who composes sketches of the victims and designs and runs computer programs positing scenarios of the crime. Brennan also has an intern to assist her; in the first three seasons that position is held by Zack Addy (Eric Millegan). In season three, FBI psychologist Dr. Lance Sweets (Jonathan Francis Daley) is added, who joins to research Booth and Brennan's unique relationship as partners but also to add his psychological interpretations of cases. Like *The Big Bang Theory*, it can be argued that

several characters in *Bones* have enough defining characteristics to be considered part of the autism spectrum. This study will focus on two of these characters.

Case Study: Dr. Temperance Brennan, Performed by Emily Deschanel

Several times during the series, Dr. Brennan notes her social difficulties. Even in the pilot episode, she says, "I'm good with bones and lousy with people." She finds a kind of comfort in her work because although people are deceptive and often difficult to understand, bones always reveal truth to Brennan. Most of the time, Brennan has a matter-of-fact tone and a flat expression. Her eye contact is good, except when she is working; then she tends to focus only on the remains. Even though she regularly makes good eye contact, Brennan admits not understanding the rationale behind eye contact until she took this job. In one episode, she tells Booth that he taught her the importance of eye contact ("The Beginning of the End"). However, Brennan does not believe the adage that "the eyes are the windows to the soul." A person of interest once expressed in an interview that he saw a longing in the victim's eyes before she died; Brennan's immediate, matter-of-fact response is, "It's a myth that a person's intentions and desires can be seen in the eyes" ("The Doctor in the Photo").

One scene in particular demonstrates Brennan's weakness in reading non-verbal cues. Brennan's intern expresses frustration in his failure to notice a key piece of evidence. Cam makes eye contact with Brennan and, with a nod, gestures toward the intern. Somewhat confused, Brennan says, "No, I can't believe you missed that either." Cam explains to her, later, that she was expecting Brennan to encourage the young intern; Brennan only replies, "Then you should've said so. Booth says I stink at non-verbal

communication" ("Fire in the Ice"). Dr. Brennan envies Booth and Sweets for their ability to read body language and, subsequently, their ability to know when people are lying. She once asks Sweets to teach her how to understand people in this insightful way, but their session only proves how poor Bones is at reading facial expressions ("The Bones that Foam").

Brennan does not have many friends. The people who are closest to her are the people with whom she works, and most of them are more colleagues than friends. She considers Angela to be her best friend, and Booth is also intimately close to "Bones." Dr. Brennan has had romantic relationships, but most of them failed to endure. Booth is clearly infatuated with her, especially in season five, but she does not seem to recognize or care about his interest in her. When he finally asks her, directly, if they can attempt a romantic relationship, she rejects him saying, "I don't have your kind of open heart . . . . I am not a gambler. I'm a scientist. I can't change. I don't know how! I don't know how" ("The Parts in the Sum of the Whole"). Nevertheless, Booth and Brennan's relationship changes at the end of season six when she announces that she is carrying Booth's child ("The Change in the Game"). As of the end of season seven, they remain unmarried, but they live together to raise their daughter Christine.

Dr. Brennan expresses little emotional or social reciprocity. She is very indelicate when questioning and interacting with people involved in a case; she often blurts out in interviews that the victim is dead while Booth tries to keep that sensitive information secret until people are adequately prepared. Temperance also often seems to be rather haughty due to her elevated intelligence, highly specialized skill set, and her professional

detachment. For instance, in one episode a fireman inadvertently calls Dr. Brennan by the wrong name, and she, offended, corrects him. He snaps back, asking her to learn his name, but Dr. Brennan answers, "There are thousands of you in D.C. and only one of me." Later, Booth tells Brennan that she has worked with that very firefighter four times and suggests that a "normal person" would not only learn the fireman's name but the names of all his children ("The Titan on the Tracks").

On the other hand, Dr. Brennan does display some moments of empathy. Several times she insists that she is not as cold as people think she is. One example occurs on a Christmas episode. Brennan, as an outspoken atheist, prefers to celebrate Christmas by doing anthropological work in exotic foreign countries. Yet as the team is closing a case, Brennan, instead, decides to spend her Christmas Day comforting the victim's mother. She explains her reasoning to Booth:

> Brennan: Max [Brennan's father] told me that being alone at Christmas means that nobody loves you. She's burying her son . . . *alone* on Christmas. I think that's heartbreaking.
>
> Booth: You know, when I say "heartbreaking," you say that the heart is a muscle, so it can't break. It can only get crushed.
>
> Brennan: (voice breaks) Isn't it heart crushing?
>
> Booth: You want to go to his funeral?
>
> Brennan: Yes, I would. Then she won't be alone.
>
> Booth: You know what, Bones? Sometimes I think your heart muscle is bigger than people give you credit for. ("The Goop on the Girl")

Brennan clearly has some deficits in verbal communication but perhaps not the same deficits that are listed in the *DSM* diagnosis for autism. She has no trouble beginning or sustaining a conversation, and she does not have problems with echolalia. Her communication difficulty is in understanding other people. One of Dr. Brennan's most repeated phrases is, "I don't know what that means." She said it several times in the first season, usually in response to a stray popular culture reference or to metaphoric language. She often misapplies clichés; for instance, when Booth first meets her and tests her abilities, she responds, "Obviously, I passed with a lot of color . . . . It means I did very well" ("The Parts in the Sum of the Whole"). It is evident that Brennan's most fluent vernacular is the scientific jargon associated with her field. When acting as an expert witness, Dr. Brennan often uses highly technical language, and the jury has trouble understanding her testimony ("The Girl in the Fridge"). Brennan even admits that if anyone speaks to her in a way other than scientific language, many times all she hears is noise ("The Doctor in the Photo").

Related to the previous point, Dr. Brennan's obsessive area of interest is forensic anthropology. Nearly every cultural interpretation from Bones is prefaced by the phrase, "Anthropologically speaking." Of course, most of the time her obsession is beneficial because it allows her to propose unique perspectives that prove useful in whatever case her team is trying to solve. Yet at other times, Dr. Brennan's narrow focus gets her into trouble with people who do not understand her circumstance. For instance, in one episode Angela takes Temperance to a club to dance, to have fun, and to be "with people who are alive." However, as they dance, Brennan comments on how "tribal" the music

is. The people around her are insulted because they think that she is implying that they are primitive. She tries to explain to them that the music actually illustrates intellectual evolution, saying, “After the Cartesians split in the seventeenth century, we separated our mind from our bodies, the numinous from the animalistic.” That only makes the club crowd more agitated, and a fight ensues (“The Man in the Wall”). Perhaps worst, however, is that Brennan’s single-minded anthropological focus often places her at odds with her partner. Booth is a devoted Catholic, and some of Brennan’s interpretations do not sit well with his religious perspective.

Demonstrating another indication of autism, sometimes Brennan is uncompromising in regard to rules. When she is reunited with her father, Max Keenan (Ryan O’Neal), Bones is unwilling to resume a relationship with him because he was convicted of murder. One conversation she has with Max in prison demonstrates this conflict:

> Max: Well, you must like this, me in here. I finally have to follow the rules.
>
> Brennan: So that makes me less than you because I think people should follow the rules?
>
> Max: You’re upset.
>
> Brennan: Yes, of course I’m upset. My father’s a criminal.
>
> Max: No, outlaw. There’s a difference.
>
> Bones: Such subtle distinctions are lost on me and, I imagine, your victims. (“The Soccer Mom in the Mini-Van”)

Furthermore, when it comes to the way her lab is run, Brennan strictly adheres to her own rigid rules. In particular, she forbids anyone on her team to "jump to conclusions" without empirical evidence. That often puts her at odds with Dr. Saroyan, her employer. Dr. Brennan sometimes openly defies Cam when Dr. Saroyan's rules make no logical sense to Bones, but Cam, understanding Brennan's social deficits, allows her tirades three times a week ("The Boy in the Shroud").

Brennan's preoccupation with parts of objects is also helpful to her career. Each case depends on meticulously close inspection of the victim's bones. Many episodes, including the pilot, feature a montage of Brennan carefully examining the skeletal remains, sometimes reconstructing a skeleton but usually just scrutinizing the bones for any obscure anomalies. Dr. Brennan always works on this part of the process alone, and the montage often suggests that she works for hours late into the night. These moments remind us that though the rest of the team is an asset, and each member has his or her own unique ability, the cases mainly rely on Brennan's remarkable expertise and attention to detail in order to be solved.

Case Study: Dr. Zack Addy, Performed by Eric Millegan

Compared to Dr. Brennan, Zack Addy is a rather flat character. He is Dr. Brennan's assistant, and he is very keen about doing his job. In some ways, he is a duplicate of Dr. Brennan, though not as complex. The failure to develop Zack's character may be partially blamed on his short run on the show. Zack has an even less engaging affect than Brennan, including a monotone voice and an expressionless face. He rarely makes eye contact because he focuses too closely on his work. He has a working

knowledge of body language, but it is a learned skill. He tells Dr. Brennan that he was confident his dissertation had passed its defense because a member of the committee patted his shoulder. He explains, "I read a book on body language. Apparently in our culture, when an older male lays an open hand on a younger male, it conveys approval, but when he bumps a younger male with a closed fist, it conveys doubt." He then gives Brennan a rather stiff and awkward demonstration ("Judas on a Pole").

Like Brennan, Zack's peer relationships do not seem to extend beyond the lab. Zack admits that even in high school, he did not socialize ("The Boy in the Tree"). He considers Dr. Hodgins to be his best friend because they work together, and Zack relies on Hodgins for transportation. Yet even with this perception of a close relationship, Zack sees no reason to know specific details about Hodgins's personal life. This detached indifference becomes apparent when Angela asks Zack questions about Hodgins that the young intern cannot answer, even though he lives on Hodgins's property ("A Boy in a Bush"). Yet as he works in the lab, Zack seeks to improve his social relationships. He repeatedly seeks a romantic connection with a girl he always refers to as "Naomi from Paleontology," yet he fails miserably. He explains to Angela and Hodgins what happened:

> Zack: She said, "Take a hint," but when I asked, "What hint?" Naomi said if she told me it wouldn't be a hint anymore. It would be a statement . . . . I understood the individual words, but I do not comprehend her meaning.
>
> Angela: Did you tell Naomi that?
>
> Zack: Yes! She said, "Ask your friends," if I have any.

Zack takes Naomi's advice literally; he repeatedly asks his co-workers embarrassing and socially inappropriate questions about how to make Naomi happy ("The Boy in the Tree"). Hodgins eventually gives Zack a book, hoping to stop the awkward queries ("The Pain in the Heart"). Booth, however, misleads Zack in his understanding of socializing. He does not speak to Zack, but he leads Zack to think that "the cold shoulder" is an appropriate way to interact. Zack tells Brennan, "Ignoring me is Booth's way of acknowledging my presence. It's a guy thing." Brennan, however, disapproves of Booth's rude behavior, knowing that he has only adopted such deplorable treatment in order to avoid talking with Zack. She tells him, "Zack wants to fit into the real world more than anything. You're not helping" ("The Man on the Fairway").

As the *DSM* diagnosis states, Zack does "lack . . . spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people" because he is overly interested and focused on his work. The following conversation is an example:

> Hodgins: I found something very interesting!
>
> Zack: The victim's feet were severed with remarkable skill.
>
> Hodgins: Excellent insight, Zack, but the polite response is, "Really Hodgins? What did you find?"
>
> Zack: There's a sharp-force disarticulation from the distal tibia and fibula passing cleanly above the talus.
>
> Hodgins: No, I wasn't asking you. I was telling you that you should ask me.
>
> Zack: (unenthusiastically) Really Hodgins? What did you find?

Hodgins: The feet were severed with a hoof knife.

Zack: I know.

Hodgins: Because I told you.

Zack: No, because I examined the cuts under the confocal laser-scanning microscope . . . .

Hodgins: You suck all the fun out of every moment of personal triumph! ("Death in the Saddle")

It is Zack's lack of social and emotional reciprocity that eventually leads to his downfall when Brennan's team discovers that Zack has secretly been working as an apprentice to a serial killer the team calls "Gormogon," a cannibal who murders people who supposedly belong to secret societies. This discovery will be discussed in Chapter Six.

Zack's largest deficit in communication is that he takes statements literally, and unless they are explicitly spelled out he cannot respond as expected. For instance, in one episode Brennan does fieldwork to investigate a case where a bear ingested a severed hand. She sends the hand back to the lab for the rest of the team to run tests. The package is delivered by an attractive, female courier; and though the package is addressed to Zack, Hodgins receives it and flirts with the delivery girl. Later, Brennan sends some of the bear's droppings to see if they contain evidence of human remains. Hodgins paces impatiently, anxious for the package to arrive. Zack asks him what he is really waiting for, the evidence or the courier. Hodgins just lifts an eyebrow and says to Zack, "What do you think?" When the package comes, Zack receives it, and the courier flirts with him. Hodgins is annoyed, explaining that he wanted to see the delivery girl again; but

Zack, confused, answers, "You said you were waiting for your bear poop. I said, 'Are you excited about the excrement or the courier?' And you said, 'What do you think?' . . . . You have to be clear" ("The Man in the Bear"). Zack often struggles with clarity, especially when he is faced with metaphorical language. The meanings are usually lost on him, but sometimes Zack uses metaphors in an intentional attempt to appear normal that is also often unintentionally comical.

Though the "lack of varied, spontaneous, make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level" trait that is listed in the *DSM* is probably more pointed to children, there are some significant comments regarding Zack that relate to this trait. Zack's imagination is limited, but he wants to be more imaginative. In a case that involves the reported sighting of a ghost, Cam tells the skeptical Brennan that she saw her mother's spirit soon after she died. Zack asks Cam about the apparition, and she shares with him more specific details. Zack flatly responds, "Dr. Brennan says that's impossible . . . . I think it would be wonderful if it were possible" ("The Headless Witch in the Woods"). In another episode, Angela accuses Zack of lacking "whimsy," and Zack responds by trying to interject whimsical terms into his reply. Angela is not convinced ("The Boneless Bride in the River").

On the other hand, Zack does admit to having fantasies of robots taking over the world ("The Woman in the Car") and of possessing superpowers ("The Superhero in the Alley"). In both instances, he is rebuked for having such impractical notions. Nevertheless, he describes the former fantasy, somewhat facetiously, during a security interview; and when his interviewer responds, "Does it concern you that such adolescent

thoughts are a sign of emotional retardation?", Zack responds that he is "working on it." After referencing the latter fantasy, Dr. Brennan counsels, "Why fantasize? You're smart," and assures Zack that helping to solve murders "will make you a real hero in the real world."

Zack's pervasive interest is his work; he focuses on it to an abnormal degree. For instance, once when Hodgins and Angela have a passionate argument about the war in the Middle East, Zack completely ignores them as he investigates skeletal remains ("The Soldier in the Grave"). In another episode about becoming environmentally conscious, Zack discusses the possibility of buying low-impact housing that is "smaller than a janitor's closet." Hodgins, however, comments that it leaves no room for accoutrements, arguing, "Our lives aren't only about function. We're allowed to enjoy ourselves occasionally." Zack answers, "That's why I work" ("The Secret in the Soil"). His focus on his work is so intense that he does not enjoy a personal life.

Zack displays other autistic characteristics. He is very good with numerical equations and can solve equations very quickly in his head. In one case, a number is found on the victim that everyone assumes is a phone number. However, after reviewing the scene of the crime, Zack deduces that the number is actually the code for a meeting place ("The Man on Death Row"). Yet, as another symptom of autism, there are indications that Zack may have a poorly formed cerebellum. He is unable to drive a car or to ride a bicycle ("The Boy in the Tree"). When Booth asks how such a genius is unable to drive, Zack answers, "If you knew what I know about structural design, you wouldn't drive either" ("The Man on Death Row"). Zack is also occasionally clumsy. In

one case, he has his arms full of metal pipes, but keeps dropping them ("The Man in the Mud").

Diagnosis Status

There is no suggestion on the show that either Dr. Brennan or Zack Addy have a specific disability. However, both of them have been compared to Raymond Babbit in *Rain Man*. Booth makes that comparison to Dr. Brennan. While Brennan asks Booth if she can ever drive (Booth usually insists on driving when they are in the car together), she utters Raymond Babbit's echolalic phrase, "I'm an excellent driver." Immediately after Booth responds "OK, *Rain Man*," Brennan says, "I don't know what that means" ("The Woman at the Airport"), demonstrating that she was not consciously making a film reference. Also, after Zack exhibits the above number trick, Hodgins calls him an "idiot savant," which is how the psychologist at Walbrook initially described Raymond Babbit's condition ("The Man on Death Row").

Brennan is provided a rational explanation for her bizarre behavior in the pilot episode. Her parents abandoned her when she was fifteen years old, and she spent most of her teenage life in foster care, which caused her to lose trust in humanity. Sweets believes that Brennan's behavior is a coping mechanism created out of her difficult past and maintained in her line of work. As he describes it, Brennan covers a "gossamer web of rationality over the ugliness" ("The Tough Man in the Tender Chicken"). The explanation for Zack's behavior is far more cryptic. His colleagues make subtle hints that something is wrong with him but are never specific. Perhaps the most direct hint comes after Zack's attempt at whimsy. Angela's reply to him is, "Well, you're

handicapped, Zack. Someone really needs to run a telethon for you" ("The Boneless Bride in the River"). Hodgins suggests that Zack is "half-alien" ("Spaceman in the Crater"). Zack never reveals the nature of his condition, and Brennan does not seem to care. When Booth asks her what she calls "whatever Zack's deal is," she answers, "I call it genius" ("The Widow's Son in the Windshield"). Oddly enough, Dr. Sweets does not immediately see any abnormal condition in Zack; when the prosecutor makes a deal to send Zack to a mental institution instead of jail after the Gormogon case, Sweets argues, "No, that won't hold up. Zack isn't insane" ("The Pain in the Heart").

Behind the Scenes Perspectives

It is popular opinion that both of these characters have Asperger's Syndrome. Brian Bethune's article "Autistic License" cites both Brennan and Addy as having this specific disorder. Even in an episode review, Willa Paskin describes Brennan as "the genius forensic anthropologist with an undiagnosed case of Aspergers [*sic*]" ("In Praise of *Bones"*). Yet as with Sheldon Cooper, this deduction is speculative. Autism and Asperger's Syndrome are not adequately discussed on *Bones* in reference to these two characters. However, unlike the writers of *The Big Bang Theory*, the writers of *Bones* have not completely disregarded the idea.

Middle Tennessee State University, as part of its impressive forensics program, hosted a lecture series that featured Dr. Kathy Reichs, the real forensic anthropologist and mystery writer whose life inspired *Bones*. Her mystery novels feature Dr. Temperance Brennan, but Temperance is clearly not the same character as the television series because she is older and is evidently not autistic. Dr. Reichs spoke of her inspiration and

how she uses her experience with forensics to write her novels and to contribute to the show as a producer. During the question and answer session, I commented on the social deficits of the show's characters (I was very careful not to mention autism because I felt it might be offensive). I asked if the show intends to give the message that one must be "abnormal" in order to do what the "squints" do. Reichs's basic answer was much like Prady's comment about his inspiration for *The Big Bang Theory*'s characters. She explained that most of the real people in the forensic anthropology field tend to be like the characters in the show. However, as part of her answer, Reichs also said that the writers had researched and had purposely written Zack Addy as if he had Asperger's Syndrome; however, they intended no other specific conditions for any of the other characters. I was amazed to hear this validation straight from the source.

However, there may be more to this issue than Reichs realizes. An article for a Philadelphia online magazine written during the second season of *Bones* also addressed this topic of these two *Bones* characters and autism:

> While [David] Boreanaz's character [Seeley Booth], a hard-charging agent with intimacy issues, doesn't exactly break new ground on television, [Emily] Deschanel's Dr. Temperance Brennan, a brilliant scientist with extremely limited social skills, probably does—at least for women. So clueless is Brennan when it comes to the way most humans interact that Boreanaz's Booth has been forced to become a sort of guide to the world outside Brennan's laboratory.

> When asked if Brennan might not actually have Asperger's syndrome . . . Deschanel nodded. "Hart Hanson, the creator of the show, and I discuss, you know, that my character almost has Asperger's syndrome and, you know, if maybe if it was a film, that I maybe specifically would have Asperger's," she said. "If you look at the character of Zack . . . he almost definitely has Asperger's syndrome," she added.
>
> "I think it's fascinating to have a character who's brilliant in one area and clueless" in others, Deschanel said. "And it's so sweet that she's trying to learn about things. You know, I talked to a psychologist who specializes in people with Asperger's and she's worked with kids who start at 12 years old not being able to understand, you know, a social interaction almost at all and then are now in college and can have relationships that are almost more in touch than a lot of kids their age, because they work so much in therapy and work so hard," she said. (Gray)

Deschanel's statements are still somewhat covert, inexact language. She does not say that Brennan and Addy *are* autistic but that they are *almost* autistic. Perhaps like Jim Parsons, Deschanel does not want to say anything that might limit her freedom to portray Dr. Brennan the way she desires, and as a result she refrains from limiting this character to a diagnosis. Yet this interview demonstrates that Deschanel is keeping the prospect of autism in mind and has even researched it to some degree. The autistic characters on *Bones* are significant because they are all so different from each other. This show

features a dynamic array of autistic people not only interacting with neurotypical characters but with each other in compelling and significant ways.

***Criminal Minds*, 2005-present, Created by Jeff Davis**

This show dramatizes the involvement of an actual section of the FBI called the Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU). The team of special agents travels around the country to investigate and to offer highly-specialized support to the local law enforcement of communities experiencing severe crimes. The BAU provides psychological profiles for the at-large criminals, or as the profilers prefer to call them "unknown subjects," "unsub" for short. The profilers make sure that the police understand the unsub's behavior, eventually identify, and capture the unsub. The team includes unit chief Aaron "Hotch" Hotchner (Thomas Gibson), Derek Morgan (Shemar Moore), and Dr. Spencer Reid (Matthew Gray Gubler). In the first two seasons, this team is under the guidance of BAU veteran Jason Gideon (Mandy Patinkin), but after a close friend of his is murdered, Gideon has doubts about his chosen career and as a result resigns from the FBI. Eventually, his position is filled by another BAU veteran, David Rossi (Joe Mantegna).

The show primarily focuses on how these characters solve crimes rather than on their particular personalities and individual character development. Yet, the show does not completely ignore the personal side of its characters. Each episode offers at least a glimpse into who these characters are, and sometimes an entire episode is centered on one particular character. Though information about the individual characters is limited by the focus of the drama, one character in particular displays traits that are pertinent to this study.

Dr. Spencer Reid, Performed by Matthew Gray Gubler

Reid is the youngest member of the team, but he is clearly the most brilliant. When Reid is asked in the pilot by a victim's family member if he considers himself to be a genius, he replies, "I don't believe that intelligence can be adequately quantified, but I do have an IQ of 187 and an eidetic memory and can read twenty thousand words per minute. Yes, I am a genius." In some ways, Reid is less impaired than other characters on the list, but that may be because he is an ardent student of human behavior. He understands non-verbal cues and facial expressions in minute detail because he has been trained to recognize them. He can experience emotional reciprocity because that is what he is expected to do as a profiler; Gideon teaches him that the ability to humanize unsubs is a profiler's most dangerous weapon ("LSDK"). However, frequently Reid works with evidence that does not require social interaction, such as with graphology. By doing so, he often notices patterns and details that others in the team miss.

Reid is usually very good at connecting with people involved with the case, especially those with disabilities. He has faced serial killers with schizophrenia ("Derailed"), with dissociative identity disorder ("Conflicted"), and with a learning disability ("Elephant's Memory"), each time calming the suspect and keeping him from killing again. Part of the reason he can connect with these people is that, according to Reid, he can identify with them. He recognizes that they are social outcasts, which he also was while growing up, but he identifies with their disabilities as well. In one such case in season two, Reid and Morgan have a conversation that demonstrates why Reid continues to take an interest in such unsubs:

Morgan: Reid, you know this is not your responsibility.

Reid: It is. I can't explain.

Morgan: Well, try me.

Reid: He knows I understand him.

Morgan: Of course you do. You're a profiler.

Reid: It's more than that.

Morgan: How?

Reid: I know what it's like to be afraid of your own mind. ("Sex, Birth, Death")

However, when asked to function beyond his training, Reid falters. He has trouble making social connections on a personal level, although he tries. In one episode, he and Rossi go to a college to speak at a lecture regarding the FBI in order to recruit new people. Rossi is easily able to connect with the students using humor, but Reid cannot find a common plane from which to communicate:

Student 1: What did you study?

Rossi: Criminal justice. Sports appreciation was all full up in my community college. (Laughter)

Reid: I hold doctorates in chemistry, mathematics, and engineering, as well as BAs in psychology and sociology. (Silence)

Student 2: How old are you?

Reid: I'm twenty-seven. As of last month, I turned twenty-seven. I'm also completing an additional BA in philosophy, which reminds me that I

have a joke. How many existentialists does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Rossi: (whispers) Don't.

Reid: All right, two–one to change the light bulb and one to observe how it symbolizes an incandescent beacon of subjectivity in a netherworld of cosmic nothingness. (Laughs, no one else does) An existentialist would–

Rossi: OK, before he does his quantum physics knock-knock joke (students laugh), do we have any other questions about opportunities in the FBI?

Afterwards, Rossi explains to Reid why the lecture failed:

Rossi: You do know we want them to actually *join* the bureau.

Reid: What? Yeah.

Rossi: We want these kids to think this is a cool place to work.

Reid: I understand that, yeah.

Rossi: Existentialism?

Reid: Existentialism is–that was a funny joke. What do you mean?

Rossi: Yeah, to Sigmund Freud.

Reid: I tell them they shouldn't send me; they keep on sending me here! I don't know why!

Rossi: Because you're young.

Reid: Young or Jung? ("Masterpiece")

Reid also has trouble connecting with his co-workers. Sometimes he offers information he thinks is pertinent and seeks to engage his friends in a discussion, only to find that no one is fascinated in the topic, such as this instance:

> Rossi: So how does our unsub go from Loser of the Year to Don Juan?
>
> Reid: Actually as Byron interpreted him, Don Juan was an ironic reversal of sex roles, and when–(notices everybody staring at him) that's about it. ("52 Pickup")

In season six, he attempts to engaging colleagues in conversations about science fiction, and they are even less interested in that subject. Usually when Reid rants about science fiction, his co-workers interrupt him and flatly tell him that they are indifferent. One co-worker interrupts him as he is comparing *Doctor Who* to *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* to say that she seriously regrets starting that conversation ("Coda"). Beyond science fiction, however, Reid has very little understanding of popular culture and often seems disconnected from the rest of the world.

Reid clearly has a social deficit when it comes to romantic pursuits. It seems he is completely unaware of what to do in such a situation. He blames his intelligence for the obstacle, as he explains to another coworker named Elle:

> Elle: I don't know how it is that you know half of the things you know, but I'm glad you do.
>
> Reid: Do you think it's why I can't get a date?
>
> Elle: You ever asked anyone out?

Reid: No.

Elle: That's why you can't get a date. ("Plain Sight")

There is one episode where Reid is infatuated with an actress who is being pursued by a stalker, and the attraction seems mutual. However, Reid resists when she tries to seduce him in a pool ("Somebody's Watching"). In another episode, Morgan suggests that Reid use his one hobby, doing magic tricks, to attract female attention. Morgan's suggestion is successful; at the end of the episode, a woman returns Reid's business card with a lipstick stain on the back and asks him, "Is *this* your card?" Reid laughs and answers, "Yes, this is my card," but he does not seem to know how else to respond ("52 Pickup"). In another episode, Reid has a date scheduled with a woman with whom he had been communicating secretly. However, Reid calls off the date at the last second when he senses danger ("The Lesson"). He nearly has a serious relationship with this woman, despite never having seen her in person. Unfortunately, the first time he does see her, she is murdered right before his eyes ("Zugzwang").

Reid has a few more autistic traits. Other characters have noted his lack of eye contact; it is one of the reasons that a subject refused to cooperate in Reid's first interview ("The Fox"). Reid's coordination skills are limited; in fact, he nearly failed his FBI training because of his poor performance in physical activities ("What Happens at Home"). He routinely failed his marksmanship training until he made a "lucky shot" between a target's eyes ("LSDK"). Reid is clearly hyperlexic; he is able to read just by running his finger down the page. When asked if he is really reading that quickly, Reid replies, "Our conscious minds can process sixteen bits of information per second; our

unconscious, however, can process eleven million. Yes, I can actually read this fast" ("Broken Mirror"). He seemed to have a specialized interest regarding serial killers; he remembers specific details about famous cases like Jack the Ripper ("Jones") and Jeffery Dahmer ("In Name and Blood"), and Reid also reacts with particular enthusiasm when he first meets Rossi because the latter had become famous by writing about serial killers ("About Face").

There may be more indications that Reid is on the spectrum, but since only hints at the characters' personalities are provided in *Criminal Minds*, it is difficult to tell. In one particular episode, Reid is even less connected to his co-workers, is more affected by adverse stimuli, and is acting probably the most autistic than he has in other times in the series. However, that abrupt behavior change is not necessarily attributed to a disability, but is treated more as a reaction to a particularly difficult case. In fact, it is implied by the show that Reid was addicted to a powerful painkiller that adversely affected his behavior ("Distress"). Nevertheless, it is still possible that the drug also aggravated Reid's autism.

Diagnosis Status

The first most telling comment about Reid's potential diagnosis is found in the episode "Broken Mirror," in which an abductor insults every member of the BAU team to demonstrate how well he knows them. As he rages, he says, "Jason Gideon, an expert of the criminal psyche yet unable to diagnose the autistic leanings of the very insecure Dr. Reid! Well, maybe he can make money counting cards in Las Vegas!" No one on the team confirms or denies anything that this unsub says; the only information they gather

from the conversation is that the kidnapper knows each member of the team well and has clearly worked with them at some time. What he said may not have been entirely accurate because it was emotionally charged, but it is significant that even an outsider recognizes Reid's autistic traits.

Members of the BAU often tease Reid and imply that there is something unusual about him. For instance, when Reid breaks a code by himself, saying that most people use a computer but he thought the task would be faster if he just did it in longhand, a teammate pokes Reid's cheek and says, "He's so lifelike!" ("The Angel Maker"). Most outsiders merely express amazement at Reid's obvious intelligence, but even then his co-workers tease instead of encourage him. For example, in one episode after Reid makes an observation after doing graphology analysis of a note from an unsub, a detective asks Rossi where the BAU found Reid. Rossi whispers back, "He was left in a basket on the steps of the FBI" ("Soul Mates"). Much later, when another co-worker asks Reid directly if he has Asperger's Syndrome, he acts as though he does not hear her. When she apologizes for the suggestion, citing "no offense," he replies, "None taken. When did you do that?" ("Through the Looking Glass"). Either Reid truly did not hear her, he could not process the comment, or he chose to ignore her. At any rate, Reid's disability is still left to the audience's interpretation.

On the other hand, in one episode Reid is expected to connect with an autistic boy who has limited communication skills. Reid finds a way to communicate with the boy; he deciphers drawings that the child makes and uses a piano to help him respond to questions. However, it seems that Rossi knows more about autism than Reid does.

When Reid meets the boy for the first time, he observes a policeman merely touching the boy's shoulder, but the encounter causes the autistic child to react by screaming and rocking back and forth. If Reid had been better informed about autism, he could have stopped the policeman from touching the boy and could have probably prevented the ensuing meltdown, but he does not. Rossi explains to them that some autistic people do not like to be touched. Later in the episode, Rossi implies that he is the father of a disabled child, which may help to explain his knowledge and insight. Reid also makes a significant comment later in the episode, telling the boy's principal, "Children with autism normally think very logically. Their minds can pick up patterns that ours normally wouldn't recognize" ("Coda"). In the pronouns he uses in this comment, Reid clearly identifies himself with neurotypicals. Perhaps if Reid had thought more about this comment and had recalled all the patterns he had discovered that no one else on his team could see, he would have reevaluated the group with which he most identifies.

In fact, the show more strongly implies that Reid may have mild schizophrenia. Reid's mother is schizophrenic, and he institutionalized her ("Revelations") because he was unable to help her no matter how much he learned about the disorder ("Sex, Birth, Death"). Reid is worried that he will inherit her schizophrenia. While talking to a co-worker about his mother, Reid very nervously adds, "Did you know that schizophrenia is genetically passed?" ("The Fisher King Part II"). In season six, Reid becomes concerned that he is on the verge of a schizophrenic break. He starts having migraine headaches that will not relent, and when he visits the doctor to get a CAT scan, the doctor can find nothing aberrant. The doctor suggests the cause might be psychological, but Reid denies

it ("Corazon"). Reid shares his concerns with some of his other co-workers, but they offer little help ("With Friends Like These . . .").

Schizophrenia and autism are similar disorders in that both involve vivid imaginations and can involve realistic, multisensory visions. However, a major difference is that people on the higher end of the autism spectrum can tell fantasy and reality apart, while people with schizophrenia cannot. Reid does not have delusions, but imagination and intelligence are integral to his personality. Yet, his social deficits, hyperlexia, and eidetic memory are probably more consistent with an autistic diagnosis.

Behind the Scenes Perspectives

Spencer Reid is a unique case because the creators and the writers of the show have not revealed that they perceive him as autistic; rather, it is the actor who portrays him. When asked about his character in an interview, Matthew Gray Gubler said, "He's an eccentric genius, with hints of schizophrenia and minor autism, Asperger's Syndrome. Reid is 24, 25 years old with three PhD's [*sic*], and one can't usually achieve that without some form of autism" (Thomas). Gubler's statement is questionable because one may be gifted without being on the autism spectrum. However, it is intriguing that an actor personally sees autism in his character and purposely enhances autistic behavior in his portrayal.

Another reason Reid is eccentric is because Gubler is eccentric. One unusual characteristic of Reid is that he wears mismatching socks. The audience might judge from this strange habit that Reid is defying the conformity of the FBI. However, Reid wears mismatching socks because that is Gubler's preference. Gubler says that he was

taught that mismatched socks bring good luck, and he believes it; in fact, he claims that he sprained his ankle on the one day in his life when he wore matching socks (Thomas). Other of Reid's idiosyncrasies that may or may not be related to autism may also be attributable to Gubler. When casting directors April Webster and Scott Davis observed those possibly autistic characteristics in Gubler, like the predilection with mismatched socks, they knew he was perfect to play the role of Reid ("The Making of *Criminal Minds*").

The producers and writers specifically write Reid to be not only brilliant but mentally distinctive. Executive producer Deborah Spera says of Reid in a bonus feature on the season one DVD, "He's astute. His way of looking at things, the way his brain works is different than everyone else's." Furthermore, executive producer Edward Allen Banero adds, "His mind works so fast that he's so unique. It's kind of hard to keep up with him" ("The Making of *Criminal Minds*"). Writer and producer Chris Mundy also has some significant thoughts about Reid's personality from a DVD feature:

> He's obviously a genius. He's our go-to if you need a piece of information, Reid knows it. So, he's a good cheat for the writers. But he's also someone that there's just this feeling that he's almost afraid of his own intelligence, and he's afraid of his mother's mental condition and what that means for him. He is the closest to that line between the people, you know, doing the analyzing and the people they're analyzing . . . . I think the more we write toward [his personality] and not toward just that

> he's a human computer, then the more amazing the show can be, and that's because it's such an interesting character. ("Profilers Profiled")

One can see from these quotations that the writers and creators of *Criminal Minds* have specific ideas about Reid and how special and important he is to the cast. A character with autism is an excellent choice to fill their expectations for this character. Reid is significant because of the writers' perspective of him as being unique and because he exemplifies the metaphors that will be posed in the next chapters. He is also a particularly popular character among people on the spectrum, according to Facebook and other digital, social media communities.

***House, M.D.,* 2004-12, Created by David Shore**

Due to the fact that this show is probably the most popular and most critically acclaimed entry in this study, not as much background information is necessary. Dr. Gregory House (Hugh Laurie) is a brilliant medical doctor who has a sardonic disposition toward his patients, his staff, and people in general. Yet that dichotomy of being brilliant yet so unlikeable is what makes him fascinating.

Case Study: Dr. Gregory House, Performed by Hugh Laurie

That dichotomy is also his most autistic feature. He is highly observant and routinely notices details that no one else on his staff sees, with the result that he is usually able to solve puzzling medical mysteries. Yet he does not rely on social skills to gather these details; he merely notices behavior and puts the pieces together. In fact, he really does not even try to connect socially with his patients. The socializing process has no meaning to him; he calls it "utterly meaningless, insincere, and therefore degrading"

(“Lines in the Sand”). He does not make eye contact when he talks to people, even when talking to his closest friend Dr. Wilson (Robert Sean Leonard). He usually distances himself from his patients, and when he does meet with them his bedside manner is not comforting. Yet in one episode, when a rape victim demands that House reveal something personal about himself, he really struggles and seeks advice from his team. He finally admits to her that he was abused as a child (“One Day, One Room”). However, beyond that, House displays few behaviors consistent with autism. He has no problems with communication, no rituals, no aversion to change, and no unfavorable reactions to certain stimuli. In fact, the case that is presented on the show strongly argues that House is not autistic. Dr. Cuddy (Lisa Edelstein) says, “People think House has no inner censor, but the fact is he holds himself back, because when he wants to hurt, he knows just where to poke a sharp stick” (“Finding Judas”). One needs social skills to be consistently and purposefully anti-social.

Diagnosis Status

House has done something very different from the other shows in this study; it has pointedly refuted the autism interpretation on the show. In the episode “Lines in the Sand,” Dr. Wilson goes to Dr. Cuddy’s office and reads her the symptoms of Asperger’s Syndrome, suggesting that House may have several traits in common with a diagnosis of Asperger’s. Yet Dr. Cuddy responds, “House doesn’t have Asperger’s. His diagnosis is much simpler: he’s a jerk.” Immediately afterward, Wilson meets with House and admits that he agrees with Cuddy’s assessment. House, himself, never acknowledges if he is autistic or not, which is probably why Brian Bethune in his article “Autistic License”

feels that the question is left open to interpretation. Show creator David Shore tends to agree with Cuddy when he says in a DVD feature, "Some people are just jerks. And it's not a clue, it's not a symptom, they're just jerks, which, obviously, you could make the case that House is one of those people" ("Anatomy of an Episode: The Jerk"). Still, the audience ponders over this question: he is certainly not "normal," but what makes House abnormal? Some autistic people on Facebook and other digital social media networks greatly identify with House and contend that he is on the spectrum. Even though, as far as the show is concerned, the matter is closed, perhaps a hint of Asperger's is strong enough for House to be considered an honorary autistic character.

***Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, 2001-11, Created by Dick Wolf**

The best summary of *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* is provided in the prelude to every episode, a strategy employed in all shows of the *Law and Order* series, "In New York City's war on crime, the worst criminal offenders are pursued by the detectives of the Major Case Squad. These are their stories." Each episode starts from the offenders' point of view, with events leading up to the crime or opening with the crime itself. The series is not a "whodunit"; it is about how detectives find criminals and bring them to justice. Much like other *Law and Order* storylines, many of the cases on *Criminal Intent* are based on cases that have happened in real life. Early in the series, the team includes Detectives Robert Goren (Vincent D'Onofrio) and Alexandra Eames (Kathryn Erbe).

There are fewer personal characteristics revealed in the characters on *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* than there are on *Criminal Minds*. Everything divulged about the characters' personalities is usually connected closely to the cases they work. It is

sometimes hard to tell how genuine the observed characteristics are because the characters often rely on ruses to fool suspects. This, too, is similar to the other *Law and Order* series and to classic detective fiction because, in such stories, the focus is usually more on the case than on the detectives.

Case Study: Detective Robert Goren, Performed by Vincent D'Onofrio

Basically three observations can be made about Goren: he is observant, intelligent, and very eccentric. He usually is the first to notice minute details at a crime scene that can prove vital to the case. These details are often sensory; he pays particular attention to smells. Goren has a good memory, but he mostly knows how to find information. He is often found reading, and he regards his library card as his most powerful tool ("Who is Robert Goren?"). Perhaps he is hyperlexic, but it seems he uses books mainly to gather necessary, expedient information. There is no indication that Goren reads especially fast or that that he reads compulsively, though he does seem to retain information unusually well. Some of Goren's mannerisms seem simply strange, but they also appear to serve the purpose of getting the suspect's attention. For instance, in the pilot episode "One," during an interrogation, for no apparent reason, Goren starts leaning sideways. This strange eye contact throws the suspect off-balance, and he looks straight at Goren as the leaning detective continues to question the suspect. Goren has a particular knowledge and rapport with people who are mentally disabled. In one episode, he casually has a conversation with a homeless man with schizophrenic tendencies; afterwards, Goren tells Eames that he had "lots of practice" ("The Faithful"). He can easily recognize symptoms of mental disorders, including autism. In an episode in

season two, for instance, Goren develops particular interest in a man who has undiagnosed Asperger's Syndrome. Goren is the first to identify the symptoms and to inform the man of his diagnosis, and he also uses that information to arrest him ("Probability").

On the other hand, Goren may be a little too manipulative to be considered autistic. He possesses an uncanny understanding of human behavior and how to twist it. For instance, in the pilot episode, he tells a girlfriend of their prime suspect that her boyfriend has AIDS and has, in all likelihood, given the disease to her. When she does not believe him, he opens the case folder and tells her on which page she would find that evidence. He talks to her for several minutes trying to convince her to turn in her boyfriend since he has given her a death sentence. As Goren leaves, the police chief remarks that the young woman has been given a "tough break," but Goren replies, "Tougher if it was true." Goren's way of convincing her of something that is not true is not typical of other autistic characters.

Diagnosis Status

The show does not discuss if Goren has any specific condition because that is a topic unrelated to the focus. There are, however, hints that there is something mentally askew about Goren. During the episode about the man with Asperger's Syndrome, Eames is the one who notices how similar Goren is to the suspect. She tells Goren after they first meet the man, "I didn't know you had an older, geekier brother." At the close of the case, Eames encourages Goren to stay connected to the criminal, saying. "I'm sure

he'd like a pen pal" ("Probability"). Later in the series, Goren meets with a psychiatrist on a regular basis, further suggesting that Goren has some mental unbalance.

Behind the Scenes Perspectives

Much like Gubler's portrayal of Spencer Reid, many of Goren's eccentricities seem to be the choice of the actor. The writers of the show wanted a detective like Sherlock Holmes, as technical advisor Michael Struk explains in a DVD feature, "I mean, there's nothing he misses. He almost has X-ray vision, and almost like a soothsayer he can tell the future." Executive producer and writer René Balcer admits that Goren is also based on a real person, forensic psychiatrist Dr. Park Dietz, who also worked for the show as a technical advisor. Balcer explains that Dietz "has a way of talking to you and leaving pauses that suddenly you feel the need to fill, and he's able to get you to say things that you wouldn't normally say."

However, it is apparently D'Onofrio's own decision to make Goren so eccentric. In the same DVD feature, D'Onofrio has a telling description about his interpretation of the character and the origin of the strange moment in the pilot episode when Goren leans over to talk to the suspect:

> I started to realize very quickly that I was going to have to start making choices that were not very common. I did it slowly. I pushed, I pushed, I pushed, and I just made odd choices. I took my time with it and delivered a little bit each episode. My job on this show is to be somebody that can get away with things that nobody else could . . . . I remember the first day. When Dick [Wolf] was on set, it was during the first episode, it was

> during a small interrogation . . . . He said, “You know, there’s another way to approach this scene. You could smile at the guy. If you wanted to, you could.” And I thought about that, and I carried it into the scene with me. But I tried it a couple of times, and every time I did, the other actor didn’t like it. The actor actually didn’t like it. I could tell by his performance; he didn’t know what to do with it. So it came around to another take. It was like the third take. I didn’t smile, but as I was talking to him, he had this thing about looking down. He would look down at the table. So I waited until he looked down, and I did this dip and found his eyes. But he kept on looking down, so I kept on dipping further and further until our eyes locked, and then I brought him back up with my eyes. You know, and it was, and I got away with it. It was the beginning of all the strange moves and postures of my character. (“Who is Robert Goren?”)

Since D’Onofrio made the decision to go “off-script,” he added a new dimension to his character that the writers did not anticipate. They liked it, however, and saw the opportunity to bring a new kind of character to television.

The only indication that writers offer about any specific condition applicable to Goren is that, like Reid, he has a family history of schizophrenia. Evidently, though, they do not believe that Goren has the tendency for mental illness. Dietz says of him:

> Law enforcement people are diverse. What happens from time to time, and I think is problematic, is that people go into an area of specialization in law enforcement, or in medicine for that matter, that reflects their own

> pathology or their own demons. That's not good. Now Goren has not done precisely that. Goren has a family history of schizophrenia. He's odd and quirky. He's sensitive about mental illness. ("Who is Robert Goren?")

Dietz is saying that if Goren really had a mental difference, the disorder would be detrimental to his job. However, Adrian Monk challenges that opinion, as seen especially in Tony Shalhoub's comments.

***Parenthood*, 2010-present, Created by Jason Katims**

As the name suggests, this show is about the problems and rewards that come with being a parent, and it investigates these by looking at a large family with the surname Braverman. Most of the show focuses its attention on the eldest, successful son Adam Braverman (Peter Krause) and his stay-at-home wife Kristina (Monica Potter). They have a teenage daughter named Haddie, a nine-year-old son named Max (Max Burkholder), and at the beginning of season three, a newborn daughter named Nora. It seems that the message of the show is that parenthood is chaotic, but family prevails through the chaos. Ratings for this show have never been very good, and it even faced cancellation around the end of season two. However, the autistic character in the show kept some members of the audience so interested that this element may have kept it on the air.

Case Study: Max Braverman, Performed by Max Burkholder

Max is diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome in the series' second episode, and suspicions were first roused in the pilot. Max's eye contact is not great, as he always

appears to be looking off in the distance, and he has many obsessive interests, including pirates, lizards, and bugs. He sees no reason to socialize; when others encourage him to make friends because it is fun, Max asks for one reason why it is fun to have a friend ("Namaste No More"). Adam becomes frustrated that Max will not have a conversation or share in his interests ("I'm Cooler than You Think"). Max is very specific about how he eats his food and is particular about his schedule; when events do not go the way he wants or expects, he often throws tantrums. He does not understand that everyone else does not share the same standards that he does, even after he learns about his diagnosis.

One of the reasons that this show includes and discusses autism is that the creator's son has Asperger's Syndrome. Jason Katims explains, "At first I wasn't sure I wanted to go there, but then I started to remember that everyone is dealing with something, and the goal of great TV is to reach a universal truth" (Cava). He explains that autism in this show is supposed to be just another issue that parents may face. "The premise of the show is that your children aren't who you expected them to be; that's what you have to deal with as a parent. That works both on the level of Max as a child with Asperger's and a teenage daughter who was out smoking pot . . . It was scary to introduce Max and Asperger's into a series that was supposed to be a light, comedic family show. But it was important for me to do, and I feel that it has deepened the show as a whole," Katims says. He also explains that he hopes *Parenthood* will help "normalize" autism and "take . . . the mystery out of it" (Arky).

Most of the focus of the show is still on the parents, and unfortunately they see Max's autism more as a detriment than a gift or even an opportunity. However, when Max describes his disorder, he gives a different perspective than his family:

> Having Asperger's makes some things very difficult for me, like looking people in the eye or saying, "Hello." So I don't do those things very often. Some things come very easily to me because I have Asperger's, like being smart and remembering almost everything. Also, it means being tenacious . . . . Some people say that having Asperger's can sometimes be a bad thing, but I'm glad I have it because I think it's my greatest strength. ("I'll Be Right Here")

Two other television shows also will be featured in this study, but not as many details are needed. The first show is Syfy Channel's *Alphas* (2011-12), which follows the adventures of characters with supernatural abilities. One member of this group, Gary Bell (Ryan Cartwright), is autistic, and he is described as a "tranducer," meaning that he has the ability to see and to interact with electromagnetic signals in the air. Gary is especially significant because he claims his identity in a rather shocking way. In one episode, a young intimidator calls Gary a "retard," which is a serious slur in the disability community. Gary, clearly offended, responds, "I'm autistic; you're a retard!" ("Never Let Me Go"). He also is determined to become independent and to be taken seriously, qualities other characters with autism do not always seek. The show also had, for a short time, a non-verbal autistic character, Anna, who is also determined to be independent

("Rosetta"). This show was very short-lived, and the creators have not given reasons why they saw a need to portray autism.

The other show this study will mention is the BBC series *Sherlock,* a twenty-first century reimagining of the Holmes mysteries. In this series, Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) stims and speaks in a very fast monotone voice, especially when he is delivering his "deductions" about people he encounters. On the episode "The Hounds of Baskerville," Detective Inspector Lestrade tries to think of a word to describe Holmes's overt eccentricities, and Dr. Watson (Martin Freeman) suggests, "Asperger's?" As of yet, no further comment on Sherlock's autism has been made on this show; perhaps the closest comment he makes of himself is when he, somewhat facetiously, describes himself to another detective as a "high-functioning sociopath" ("A Study in Pink"). Like Abed's remark discussed earlier, Holmes's use of the term "high-functioning" may harken to an autism diagnosis. Holmes also has suggested that he cannot help the way he is, as he tells Watson, "I can't just turn it [his ability] on and off like a tap" ("The Reichenbach Fall").

The characters on these television shows, though the majority of them do not have a definitive diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, plainly do have autistic tendencies as described in the *DSM-IV.* Like the films discussed in the previous chapter, these shows all discuss pertinent issues, such as certain types of relationships, and share some of the same intriguing images and themes. These will be discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER 5

Autistic Identity Metaphors: The Masquerade and the Detective Motif

As seen in the previous chapters, autistic characters are often presented as eccentric detectives who are amazingly able to unmask criminals. Yet expressionless, isolated, peculiar, and childlike, autistic characters are often tied to masks in other ways as well. Therefore, the recurring images of costumes and autistic characters as detectives will be discussed first for a number of reasons. They appear to be the most ubiquitous symbols in the selections for this study, but they also can be seen as metaphors that advance an autistic identity. These representations focus on the positive characteristics of an autism diagnosis, such as uniqueness and enhanced mental abilities. We will see in this chapter how these metaphors can be interpreted as expressions of what it is like to live with autism.

Autism and the Masquerade

Costuming is a unique metaphor because it serves more than one function. Those who have studied the utilization of costumes in drama have, of course, noticed this. Petr Bogatyrev points out in his essay "Costume as a Sign" that there is a dual function in sartorial symbols: "In all cases, costume is both material object and sign" (13). Costumes have a practical use and a symbolic interpretation, and to understand costumes fully, one must consider both functions. The practical uses of costumes in popular culture's interpretations of autism are unexpected, and the following will argue that costumes

portray more than one symbol, one that reveals autistic identity and another that reveals neurotypical identity.

In *Mozart and the Whale,* after Isabel Sorensen joins the autism support group, Donald Morton awkwardly tells her that a friend wants to invite her to a Halloween party. Isabel seems very surprised that he is asking her on behalf of another person, but as Donald explains his reasoning, he offers something very insightful:

> Donald: I don't go to the Halloween party ever. So . . . my friends dress up on Halloween to hide who they really are, and uh . . .
>
> Isabel: That's sad but credible.
>
> Donald: I have a costume, too, at home, but it reveals who I really am, and nobody knows.
>
> Isabel: You take me to the party. Wear your costume! I would be so honored. In fact, let's not go to the party. Just meet me at the mall. Everyone's in costume; they won't even notice us. (Whispers) That's what I love about Halloween!

How does a costume reveal and not conceal? The understood function of a costume is to hide one's identity by adopting another, yet somehow Donald's costume subverts that function, making his costume choice all the more symbolic.

However, the symbolism of his costume is not immediately apparent. Donald's costume is a whale, which does not seem to be particularly revealing of his character. At that point in the movie, the audience knows that Donald is interested in animals because he has several pet birds, but he has never indicated an interest in whales. He meets

Isabel, who is wearing a costume of composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (hence the title of the film). The audience can understand the symbolic qualities of Isabel's costume more clearly as she tells Donald that Mozart's music connotes "anger, passion, and transcendence," qualities that Donald immediately recognizes as applying to Isabel. Yet in order to understand Donald's costume choice, Isabel asks him:

> Isabel: So, this is who you really are?
>
> Donald: Yeah.
>
> Isabel: This is so hot!
>
> Donald: Yeah . . . .
>
> Isabel: So why is that? . . . . That you're a whale?
>
> Donald: Well, there's lots of reasons.
>
> Isabel: Name six.
>
> Donald: Well for one, they're very big.
>
> Isabel: Really?
>
> Donald: Yeah.
>
> Isabel: And?
>
> Donald: Oh . . . all my life I've kind of felt like I was on the sidelines. I was watching the parade go by, but when you're a whale, you are the parade!
>
> Isabel: I bet you know all about whales.
>
> Donald: Yes.
>
> Isabel: Well, tell me.

> Donald: Well, it's a very long story.
>
> Isabel: Well, the last bus isn't for another two hours, forty-seven minutes, and three, no two, one, one second. Quick Donald, tell me!

This conversation does not divulge to the audience all the reasons why Donald identifies with whales; the audience does not hear four reasons of the six Isabel requested. Yet, it offers a clue; when Donald, who is autistic, acknowledges that he knows "all about whales," he suggests that whales are his pervasive interest. This is further supported throughout the movie: after the Halloween date, Donald looks at pictures of whales, we later see that his shower curtain is decorated with fish, and his friends say that his favorite activity is whale watching. Isabel, who is also autistic, seems to have a pervasive interest in Mozart as well; after this Halloween date, she paints murals on the walls of her apartment while listening to Mozart's music, and one of his most recognized pieces plays during a tumultuous dinner scene. The other comment in this conversation about Donald's being in the parade instead of watching the parade seems to explain not so much who Donald is but who he wishes to be. Autism sometimes allows him to be only an observer and not a participant in life, and he greatly desires to participate. He feels that when he is engaged in his pervasive interest, he is being a participant. When Isabel mimics Donald's exactness with numbers, she acknowledges that wish and participates with him by reaching him through his fascinations.

Donald and Isabel choose costumes purposefully because they represent something that the characters desire, something that they want to say about themselves. This is very different from the typical function of costumes, which studies of masquerade

parties from the eighteenth century help define. In *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (1986), Terry Castle describes how the typical function of costumesserves to conceal identity and superimpose new identities:

> From basically simple violations of the sartorial code—the conventional symbolic connections between identity and the trappings of identity—masquerades developed scenes of vertiginous existential recombination. New bodies were superimposed over old; anarchic, theatrical selves displaced supposedly essential ones; masks, or personae, obscured persons . . . . One became the other in an act of ecstatic impersonation. The true self remained elusive and inaccessible—illegible—within its fantastical encasements. The result was a material devaluation of unitary notion of the self . . . . The pleasure of the masquerade attends on the experience of doubleness, the alienation of inner from outer, a fantasy of two bodies simultaneously and thrillingly present, self and other together, the two-in-one. (4-5)

In Lloyd Davis's study of the function of costume in sixteenth-century drama, *Guise and Disguise: Rhetoric and Characterization in the English Renaissance* (1993), Davis argues that the original purpose of costumes is to discover one's identity:

> First, [disguise] sets character as the authentic and determinant origin of disguise, even where disguise is a type of reflexive deception . . . . Disguise signifies the truth of "human nature" . . . . Next, disguise is seen

> as a teleologically oriented to the affirmation and resolution of true identity. Selfhood is the goal of disguise . . . . Thirdly, disguise is considered a means, perhaps a therapy, through which mature individuality and full humanity can evolve and develop. Disguise realizes self-knowledge . . . . Lastly, disguise becomes a means of affirming the "normal" range of personal relationships and hierarchies. Disguise socializes selfhood . . . (15-16)

These concepts offer significant commentary on the above example. The characters of this study are not hiding when they assume a disguise. The true self is always accessible, and "self and other" are always together; even when they adopt the persona of their costumes, these characters do so according to their own interpretations. Their costume choices reveal the truth of the characters' natures, establish selfhood, and offer a safe space to socialize. These characters' costumes of choice are associated with the characters' interests, personalities, and desires. To them, it does not matter if others disapprove or misunderstand. Like Donald in his whale costume, when these characters wear their determined costumes, they are saying, "This is who I am. Accept me." They are asserting their identity.

Mozart and the Whale's commentary on costuming also brings to mind a popular theory initially proposed by psychoanalyst Joan Riviere in "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929). In this essay, Riviere describes a female patient who displays many conventions expected of women: a loving wife, a diligent housekeeper, and a dedicated professional in the workplace. However, this woman experiences real anxiety and

disturbing dreams that make her doubt that she can truly live up to these conventions. Riviere's concludes that her patient uses these conventions as a disguise to conceal her anxieties and doubts about her inadequate performance before people, particularly men, who may be more capable. In Riviere's words, "Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it—much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods" (38). Her argument, then, is that when women act as they are expected to act, they are not being true to themselves. They are putting on a show to pacify society.

Several critics have responded to Riviere's theory. Some merely rephrase Riviere's concept of the masquerade in their own words; others criticize its validity. Yet many critics successfully apply Riviere's idea to their own theories. In her essay "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator" (1982), Mary Ann Doane combines Riviere's theory with a number of other feminist theories, including Laura Mulvey's argument of the "gaze" in cinema, to elaborate on ways to analyze female characters in film, saying that the masquerade "doubles representation" (81-2). Kathleen Woodward, in her essay "Youthfulness as a Masquerade" (1988), suggests that the illusion of youth presented through the means of cosmetics is a kind of masquerade women use every day to make themselves more pleasing to society. Riviere's theory even has been discussed in Tobin Siebers'book *Disability Theory* (2008), especially in the context of "passing." As other minority groups do, some people with disabilities attempt to pass as "normal" in order to gain acceptance, yet sometimes they find they

must overemphasize their disabilities in order to receive adequate accommodations. For example, Siebers explains in his book that he has a disability affecting his mobility as a result of polio, but he has faced situations when people are insensitive to his disability because he has the ability to walk. In one instance, an airport gatekeeper prevented Siebers from boarding an airplane early because he was not in a wheelchair and therefore was not visibly disabled. Therefore, to avoid misunderstandings like this, Siebers overemphasizes his limp at the airport so that employees can more clearly detect that he is indeed disabled (96-97).

Siebers makes a comment that is significant in this case:

> Identities are a means of inserting persons into the social world. They are narrative responses to and creations of social reality, aiding cooperation between people, representing significant theories about the constructions of the real, and containing useful information about how human beings should make their appearance in the world . . . . Disability identities would seem to be the exception to this rule: they are perceived as a bad fit, their relation to society is largely negative, and so, it would seem, is their theoretical value. In fact, the reverse may be true. While people with disabilities have little power in the social world, their identities possess great theoretical power because they reflect perspectives capable of illuminating the ideological blueprints used to construct social reality. *Disability identities, because of their lack of fit, serve as critical*

> *frameworks for identifying and questioning the complicated ideologies on which social injustices and oppression depend.* (105, my emphasis)

Autism does not mold easily into a socially acceptable shape, but Sieberssays that it is not supposed to do so. Autism raises the question of what is "normal" and challenges the notion that "normal" exists.

The above example in *Mozart and the Whale* does not seem to be a masquerade in the way that Riviere describes because in this interpretation of the masquerade Donald and Isabel are being true to themselves and refusing to play by society's rules. This example suggests, therefore, that autism is portrayed as a "maskless" masquerade. These characters do not use costumes to hide themselves but to reveal themselves. An autistic mask is valid because it reflects the unique way that these characters' brains work, their personalities, and their interests.

Many other examples of autistic characters' "maskless masquerades" appear in these popular culture offerings. They are most common in the television shows and are usually, but not always, associated with Halloween. Like Donald and Isabel's costumes, the outfits chosen by other characters are usually associated with their obsessive interests but may also reflect some other aspect of their personalities.

In *Adam,* when Adam Raki and Beth Buckwald first meet, Adam asks her if she can see the sky from her apartment window, and Beth somewhat sarcastically answers that she might if her windows were not so dirty. Later in the movie, she screams when she sees Adam outside her window in an astronaut suit trying to clean her windows, and then she invites Adam to come inside and talks to him. This scene happens after Adam

had explained his diagnosis to Beth, but in this scene, she starts to see the kind of person Adam really is. The sign of the astronaut suit reflects Adam's pervasive interest in astronomy.

In the *Bones* Halloween episode "The Mummy in the Maze," the entire cast of characters is required to attend the Jeffersonian Halloween ball. Dr. Temperance Brennan says she intends to wear the costume that she always wears for Halloween, but she will not say what it is. In the middle of the episode, the audience learns that it is a costume of the superhero Wonder Woman. At first, she distances herself from the costume persona; when Seeley Booth suggests that Dr. Brennan put Wonder Woman's "Lasso of Truth" around herself, Dr. Brennan answers, "Now, you're being irrational. This lasso doesn't actually work. These bracelets aren't actually made of Amazonium. They're stainless steel; they can't stop a bullet." Yet at the end of the episode, Brennan starts spinning in a circle, which is the way that Wonder Woman returns to her alter ego. This outfit demonstrates Dr. Brennan's personality as a strong, powerful woman and as a protector of truth, which is part of Wonder Woman's superpower and a quality that Dr. Brennan values immensely. Brennan is asserting this identity by indulging in the one time of year when she can become her favorite superhero.

Community has a Halloween episode every season, and Abed Nadir does not only wear his costume but puts a good deal of thought into becoming the character it represents. The first season offers the best example of this phenomenon. Abed dresses as Batman, and throughout the episode he speaks in a gruff voice and swishes his cape as Batman would. Yet sometimes his interpretation seems more like a combination of

Batman and *Rain Man*, which might be Abed's autistic characteristics emerging. He breaks character only once in this episode; when Jeff lashes out at Abed that he is not really Batman, Abed assumes his usual voice and responds, "I know I'm not Batman. You can try not being a jerk" ("Introduction to Statistics"). Abed is still being true to himself by allowing his characteristics to come through and by acting as a favorite character of popular culture. He wants neurotypicals to realize what he is doing in this costume as his comment to Jeff suggests.

In the second season, Abed and Troy wear costumes that go together; both characters are from the *Alien* series of movies. Yet when Troy notices that his costume does not impress girls, he decides at the last moment to change his costume into a vampire, a decision that greatly hurts and offends Abed. He says to Troy, "What defines a nerd, committing to an awesome Halloween costume with your best friend? Is that what nerds do?" ("Epidemiology"). Abed demonstrates that wearing a costume and committing to its character are expressions of his interest in popular culture and also a way to feel acceptance. Again, he wants his neurotypical friend to understand the expression of identity.

In season three of *Criminal Minds*, Dr. Spencer Reid demonstrates his fondness for Halloween by dressing in an elaborate costume of Frankenstein's monster, complete with a noose around his neck. As Reid greets his coworkers, sneaking up on them and handing out candy, Derek Morgan tells Reid that Halloween bothers him because he does not like people to be concealed by disguises. Reid answers, "That's the best thing about Halloween; you can be anyone you want to be." As it so happens, at that moment the

team meets David Rossi for the first time, and Reid immediately takes off his monster costume to greet him ("About Face"). The scene demonstrates that Reid is not just a "walking encyclopedia" and reveals more of his true character; he uses the costume to connect with his friends and to reveal a more playful side of his identity, but he considers it inappropriate or is otherwise uncomfortable displaying such intimacy in front of Rossi, a stranger whom he views as superior and as an idol. Reid must be comfortable with this new, intimidating person and get to know him as a colleague before Reid can reveal this side of his identity to him.

On the Halloween episode of *Monk*, Julie Teeger asks Adrian Monk to take her trick-or-treating, and he wears the costume of a crossing guard as he escorts her. He tells her that the last time he wore this outfit was in college, suggesting that it used to be his uniform for an actual job. The costume represents Monk's strict dedication to the law and his desire for order and precision. He even demonstrates the costume's power while wearing it; he corrects other characters when they guess his uniform's title, contending that he is a "safety patrol officer," and when children run ahead of him to the curb, he yells, "Hey wait, cross in the green, not in between!" ("Mr. Monk Goes Home Again"). Therefore, this costume is also a demonstration of Monk's identity.

We learn from the pilot episode of *Parenthood* that Max Braverman insists on wearing a pirate costume everywhere he goes. In the episode following the pilot, we discover how much this behavior upsets his father, Adam, who fears that this insistence will brand Max as a "freak" to his peers. When Max is first diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, Adam is most interested in "getting him out of that thing [the pirate

costume],” but the psychiatrist teaches Adam that it is best to meet Max in his world before forcing such a mandate on Max. At the close of the episode, Adam dresses as a pirate too and plays with his son (“Man Versus Possum”). Adam does not understand that asking Max to stop dressing in a costume of his pervasive interest is similar to telling Max that he cannot be autistic, that he cannot be the person that he is, because the costume represents Max’s identity.

The costume is important to Max, and he further demonstrates his interest in costumes in *Parenthood*’s second season’s Halloween episode. Max surprises everyone when he announces that he desires to go against the family’s tradition of staying home on Halloween night; he wants to go trick-or-treating, and he further surprises his family by wanting to dress, not as a pirate, but as a cockroach (“Orange Alert”). Entomology is another one of Max’s interests, and he wants to acknowledge that side of himself as well. The cockroach costume is just as much a part of Max as is the pirate costume and is therefore a further assertion of his identity.

The Big Bang Theory has the most examples of the importance of costume. The first example occurs in the first season during the Halloween episode when Penny invites her “nerd” friends to a Halloween party. Yet when they meet before the party, the four friends discover, quite distressingly, that they have each chosen the same costume: the comic book hero the Flash. It is unusual that four different characters would choose the same superhero costume, especially a comic book character who is not as well-recognized as Superman or Batman, but perhaps there is something about the Flash that all four of these men desire to project into their identity. The Flash is probably more

athletic than any of them, and he is also quick-witted, adeptly demonstrating social abilities that they lack. The scene therefore suggests that these four core characters are indeed, as the saying goes, "cut from the same cloth," and there seems to be an implication that they all suffer the same social and athletic weaknesses.

Though the Flash scene is the more memorable and more comedic, the characters' subsequent costume choices also reveal a good deal about their personalities. Leonard appropriates another "geeky" standby, Frodo Baggins. His is the only costume that seems to be assembled at the last minute; it consists of his corduroy suit, a cape, pointy ears, and fake furry feet. Even so, Frodo, as a fantasy hero, comprises many of the same loyal and reluctantly brave qualities that Leonard demonstrates in this episode when he confronts Penny's abusive ex-boyfriend. Raj chooses an ironic costume, the Norse god Thor. When Leonard asks why he chose that costume, Raj takes offense and accuses him of being racist; Raj's costumes are often unexpected and ironic. Raj assumes that Howard has changed into a Peter Pan costume, but Howard also takes offense and says that he is Robin Hood. This seems to be another way of demonstrating that Howard is less mature than he thinks. Sheldon's costume is the most unusual: a black suit with vertical white stripes that become thinner as they approach his navel. He indignantly explains to Leonard, "I don't care if anybody gets it; I'm going as the Doppler Effect!" Nobody at Penny's party understands Sheldon's costume; however, he insists on giving the party guests clues, thinking that his intention will then become clear. Sheldon decides that the guests' lack of understanding is "a scathing indictment of the American

education system." Yet he refuses to acquiesce to others' popular interpretation of his expression of identity, as seen in this conversation with Leonard:

> Leonard: Why don't you just tell people you're a zebra?
>
> Sheldon: Why don't you just tell people you're one of the Seven Dwarves?
>
> Leonard: Because I'm Frodo.
>
> Sheldon: Yes, well, I'm the Doppler Effect.

Yet, Leonard also refuses alternative interpretations of his costume. When Penny's ex-boyfriend continually misinterprets Leonard's costume, Leonard keeps correcting him: "I am not a dwarf. I'm a hobbit. A hobbit! Are misfiring neurons in your hippocampus preventing the conversion from short-term to long-term memory?" The only member of the group who does accept alternative interpretations of his costume is Howard. When Penny thinks that he is dressed as Peter Pan, he does not correct her ("The Middle Earth Paradigm"). This probably means that he is happy to fill any role that a female would find acceptable in order to please her. These characters recognize how important these costumes are to express identitty.

In the next season, the four main characters of this show have another opportunity to express themselves in costumes not associated with Halloween. At the beginning of "The Codpiece Topology," the four are returning from a Renaissance fair, and their costume choices are reflections of their identities. Leonard is dressed as a knight, which once more represents his loyalty and chivalry. Sheldon is a monk, which displays his restricted, ritualistic lifestyle. His desire for order is further augmented as he complains

about how historically inaccurate the fair was. Howard is dressed as a court jester, once again revealing that he is made a fool by his regular misinterpretation of proper social interaction with women. Raj's costume, again, is ironic; he is a minstrel, but due to his selective mutism, he is often unable to sing. At the close of the episode, the young men want to return to the fair, but to convince Sheldon to go again to a place that he has already criticized as incorrect and inferior, they suggest he dress as a futuristic character coming to evaluate another planet in its Renaissance. Sheldon, therefore, dresses as Mr. Spock from the original *Star Trek*. Since Spock is often regarded as an "honorary aspie" for his completely logical view of life, this costume is also appropriate.

In the fourth season, the four male characters engage in another costume venture that more adequately demonstrates their identities when they are invited to a New Year's Eve costume party at their favorite comic book store. Sheldon decides for the group that they will wear the same collective superhero costumes that they wore for the previous year's party. They had gone as the Justice League of America, based on a comic book series where several popular superheroes join forces. Sheldon, Leonard, and Howard not only wear the costume but accept the accompanying personas of the superheroes they portray. Raj, however, is unwilling because his costume, Aquaman, is not his first choice. He is clearly upset that he must wear that costume, yet he seems to have put a great deal of thought into it because he appears as if he is riding a giant seahorse. Howard is dressed as Batman, and much like Abed in *Community* speaks with a gruff Batman-like voice, even grunting in pain (in the same Batman-like voice) when Penny punches him. Unlike Abed, however, during most of the episode Howard is not in

character. Leonard, who is the Green Lantern, does not assume his character's persona, but when Penny calls him the Green Arrow (another superhero), he corrects her saying that "There's a big difference." Sheldon as the Flash, however, relishes assuming his character. When he is anxious, he jogs back and forth saying, "This is how the Flash paces." He knocks incessantly on Penny's door until she opens it, and then he explains, "I'm the Flash. I just knocked thirty thousand times." Even at the end of the episode, when Leonard annoys him, Sheldon imagines running at the speed of light to the Grand Canyon, screaming out his frustration and returning just as quickly. On the other hand, when the ensemble is presented the real opportunity to be heroes as they witness a robbery while they are still dressed in their Justice League costumes, they choose to leave the scene ("The Justice League Recombination"). Ultimately, they recognize that their costumes are merely disguises and that the personas that they imply are only symbolic. However, they still recognize the costumes as expressions of identity, particularly in their interests in popular culture.

Some may argue that using a disorder to assert one's identity is not a good practice. Susan Sontag in "Illness as Metaphor" contends that this practice is wrongwhen she states, "Feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched with meanings) is projected onto the world" (58). In Sontag's interpretation, identifying someone by his/her disease or disorder leads one to project the evils of the disease onto the individual with the condition. Some people in Disability Studies agree, which is why they assert the politically correct "person-first" language so that the individual with a disability will always be identified not by his/her disability but as a person first. For

example, instead of saying someone is blind, he/she is desribed as a person with blindness. Others in the Disability Studies field, however, resist this "person-first" way of thinking and wish to claim their disabilities as part of their identities. In the introduction to her seminal book *Claiming Disability* (1998), Simi Linton encourages people with disabilities to accept their conditions as part of themselves and "let [their] freak flag fly" (3).

The section of the disability population that seems to be the most willing to claim this part of its identity is the autistic population, and they do so by resisting person-first language. Autistic activist Jim Sinclair explains in his essay "Why I Dislike Person-First Language" (1999) that saying one is a "person with autism" rather than an "autistic person" suggests that autism is not important to that person's identity and implies negative connotations regarding autism, but mostly the phrase implies that autism can be removed from the person and that he or she would be the same person. Significantly, Sinclair uses a sartorial metaphor to explain this point:

> I can be separated from things that are not part of me, and I am still . . . the same person. I am usually a "person with a purple shirt," but I could also be a "person with a blue shirt" one day, and a "person with a yellow shirt" the next day, and I would still be the same person, because my clothing is not a part of me. But autism **is** a part of me. Autism is hard-wired into the ways my brain works. I am autistic because I **cannot** be separated from how my brain works . . . . If I did not have an autistic brain, the person I

> am would not exist. I am autistic because autism is an **essential** feature of me as a person. (emphasis Sinclair's[1])

As a result, this study asserts that it is perfectly acceptable for autistic characters to identify themselves as autistic through their identities, to "reveal who [they] really [are]." If their autism were taken away, they would not be the same characters. Costumes are an effective way of exploring and projecting this identity.

Yet there is another symbolic way that disguises are used that is equally significant in the selections discussed here in which disguises *are* meant to conceal. After the astronaut suit occurrence in *Adam*, Adam goes with Beth to a masquerade-themed restaurant. Everyone at this restaurant, including Beth, wears a mask or some other sort of costume, except for Adam. Seeing the mysterious patrons of the restaurant staring at him makes Adam anxious, and he suggests that he and Beth should leave, but Beth mildly chides him to break out of his "meager life." At their table, Adam hides behind his menu, the only mask he can find. Writer and director Max Meyers does not explain what he is trying to communicate through this scene in the DVD commentary, but he describes Adam as being "in dire straits." An initial interpretation of this scene could be that people with autism cannot truly don a mask, yet this symbol seems to be more significant than that analysis. The audience can easily see the fear in Adam's face. He knows, looking at these neurotypical strangers, that costumed or not, he is out of place and therefore does not belong.

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[1] Bold face instead of italics is used in the original text

Terry Castle offers a viable way of viewing someone who comes to a masquerade without a costume, using a scene from the novel *Cecilia* as an example that helps add meaning to the masquerade scene in *Adam*.

> One wonders, however, whether Cecilia's conspicuousness is so unpleasing on a deeper level . . . . True, her lack of a costume challenges the spirit of the occasion; in sociological terms she stands in relation to the masked crowd rather as a naked person, in the ordinary world, would to a group of clothed persons. She has broken the collective sartorial contract, and by extension, the implicit decorum of the group. (271-72)

The idea that Adam is depicted as naked in this masquerade scene is further implied in a previous scene. Beth reads to her first-grade students "The Emperor's New Clothes" and afterwards engages them in discussion. The implication is that Adam can be compared to the boy who announces that the emperor is naked. Beth realizes that such blunt honesty is sometimes necessary when she tells her students that she likes the candid boy. The masquerade scene, however, suggests that at the restaurant Adam is the emperor, lacking the proper attire for the occasion or "breaking the sartorial code," according to Castle. He can try to pretend to be "normal" and to fit in the crowd, but the menu cannot mask him.

In the same way, just being in the company of a neurotypical person does not automatically make an autistic person part of the crowd. Later in *Adam*, an unnamed character says, "Look, either you believe that human beings share some basic similarities, or you just throw the towel in." It seems easy for people in the modern era to understand

the displaced context of minorities who feel at odds in a majority culture, but with an autistic person, a similar understanding may not be communicated. Autistic people and neurotypical people generally look the same physically; the difference is usually more behavioral and generally based on perceptions. Their behavior causes autistic people to be out of place and to stand out in a crowd because neurotypical people tend to overlook the "basic similarities" and instead focus on differences. When comparing behavior and perception, these groups are not very similar at all. Therefore, the restaurant scene with Adam suggests that neurotypicals have their own sartorial code, and if autistic people want to associate successfully with neurotypicals, they must learn the code or risk embarrassing exposure.

Autism may not masquerade in Riviere's sense, but this moment from *Adam* suggests that neurotypicality is a masquerade. Like Riviere's client, neurotypical characters sense that there is a code they must follow in order to be accepted. Failure to follow these rules results in oppression and ostracism by society. Autistic people may attempt to follow this code with some success, but they often fall short. They frequently do not understand the way that neurotypical people think or act, so they cannot always "pass" as neurotypical and put on a neurotypical persona as effortlessly as putting on a mask. There are several examples in the selected films and television shows that portray struggle of autistic characters to learn this code, either trying on different costumes or personas in order to create a better "fit" in neurotypical society or failing to participate in the neurotypical masquerade as Adam does.

In *My Name is Khan*, while courting Mandira, Rizvan Khan observes a co-worker having a conversation with Mandira regarding a pink scarf. The co-worker says, "Pink is *so* your color." In the next scene, Mandira is jogging with the same co-worker and Khan joins them, wearing a bright pink sweater. "Pink is *so* my color," he tells Mandira. He realizes that in order to get Mandira's attention, he must wear a costume. In *Ocean Heaven,* Dafu's friend Ling wears a clown costume, and one way she shows her approval of him and acceptance of his friendship is by painting Dafu's face in clown makeup. Even though he interacts with Ling when she is not in her costume, Dafu identifies her with her costume, as is understood when Dafu runs away from home to look for Ling and is found sitting next to a Ronald McDonald statue. In the film *Temple Grandin,* when Temple Grandin is not allowed on to the feedlot, she disguises herself to look like the other workers. As a result, she is let through the gate because she becomes like everybody else. In another scene, when convention requires Temple to wear more proper attire, she purchases clothes that look more formal but also have a Western theme and also purchases and wears cow pins. Expressing her satisfaction with both purchases, Temple says that she likes her new clothes because they do not irritate her skin, and when Temple puts on her cow pins, she tells herself, "That's my rank. They'll see that." In doing this, she finds a way to meet social convention and to express her identity simultaneously.

At the beginning of a *Boston Legal* Halloween episode, Shirley Schmidt allows her attorneys to dress in costumes in order to boost morale. As she is explaining this to one of the partners, Jerry Espenson passes by, wearing his regular clothes. At this point

in the series, Jerry is not a member of the firm, so he is not bound by the office memo. Nevertheless, he stands out so starkly that Shirley stares at Jerry as he passes ("Trick or Treat"). When he rejoins the firm and is up for partnership, Jerry dresses for Halloween in an elaborate costume of Little Bo Peep, complete with makeup, possibly thinking that he will be deemed more socially acceptable if he participates in the Halloween custom. The only problem is that he is misinformed of the date for the Halloween party and comes, clad in costume, a day early. Jerry fails in this incident to learn the neurotypical sartorial code, since costumes are only socially acceptable on Halloween. As a result, he feels exposed and embarrassed ("Happy Trails"), just as Adam feels when he appears without costume at a masquerade.

Jerry makes use of another costume on a regular basis. Beginning in the episode "The Good Lawyer," Espenson develops the habit of relying on a prop, a wooden cigarette, on the advice of a therapist. When he puts it between his teeth, Jerry acts like a completely different person who is sarcastic and bitter. Jerry admits that he feels more confident when he uses the cigarette prop and that he is "not sure without it" ("The Innocent Man"). He probably believes that he appears more neurotypical when he has the prop. Perhaps, in some ways he does; he acts as though he has the same irritation as someone with a nicotine addiction would. Yet, with the wooden cigarette between his teeth, he also is more alienating and less empathetic toward people, so it could be that he is freer to reveal his misunderstanding of socializing. Still, he is certainly not true to his usual self, and that might be part of the reason the neurotypicals resist this costume. His friend Alan Shore tells Jerry plainly that he does not like Jerry's personality when he uses

the wooden cigarette, saying that it makes Jerry a "terrible, horrible person" ("Guise and Dolls"). Sometimes when Jerry chews on the cigarette while in litigation, Jerry's office mate Katie Lloyd yanks the prop out of his mouth, forcing him to revert to his regular personality ("The Mighty Rogues"). Therefore, Jerry's attempt to appear more neurotypical and acceptable is a failure.

A few episodes of *Community* explore the idea of appearing in neurotypical fashion but address the idea of persona more than costume. In "Physical Education," the Greendale study group tries to convince Abed Nadir to initiate a romantic relationship with a young woman who, apparently, is infatuated with him. Jeff Winger encourages Abed to "be himself," but when the group brings Abed to the cafeteria to meet the girl, he refuses to move closer to her table. He tells them, "I'm being myself . . . . I wouldn't go over there." They ask him to try, and he proceeds toward her, hissing and sticking out his tongue. Britta Perry realizes, "I know that we're all good people, and good people believe that people should be themselves, but if Abed is himself, he's going to die alone." So the group encourages Abed to pretend to be someone else, which is not difficult for Abed because he easily impersonates characters from television and movies. He explains to his friends that he has taken their advice to be someone else only to keep his friendship alive with them, saying that he is happy with himself. He realizes that wearing a costume or putting on a performance is necessary sometimes, but he declines to forsake his own personality.

In the second season, in the episode "Critical Film Studies," Abed changes again when Jeff meets Abed on his birthday at an expensive restaurant. Jeff knows

immediately when he sees Abed that something is very different, as Abed is dressed more formally than usual. Jeff narrates, "Abed was being weird, and by that I mean he *wasn't* being weird. He was hugging, smiling, making eye contact, and in thirty seconds he hadn't made a reference to *anything*. I had come in worried about him, thinking he needed help, but seeing him like this made me more worried than ever." Later, Jeff learns that Abed *is* using a costume; Abed pretends in this incident to be an eccentric, neurotypical character from the film *My Dinner with Andre* in an attempt to connect with Jeff more effectively. When Jeff discovers what he is trying to do, Abed's ruse falls apart, and he starts acting more like himself. He explains to Jeff, "Everyone else is growing and changing all the time, and that's not really my jam." Jeff, however, says that Abed does not have to change his personality. Jeff is perhaps one of the few neurotypical characters in this study who prefers the autistic character without the neurotypical mask.

One episode of *Community* suggests that autistic people cannot successfully predict what neurotypical people will act or think because their mental structures are entirely different, and it does so through a compelling experimentation with personae.In the episode "Virtual Systems Analysis," Abed reveals to his roommate, Annie Edison, that he sometimes uses the "Dreamatorium" to enact his autistic fantasies more privately in order to simulate and try to predict how his friends in the study group might react in various situations. He tells Annie that his fantasies "are distilled by logic and then recombined into objective observation," so he feels he is being completely scientific in discovering his friends' behavior. Annie, however, suggests that before performing such

“simulations,” he should consider how his own actions affect others. The notion causes Abed to panic, and he falls to the floor. When he regains consciousness, he does not act like himself but acts like the other main characters in the *Community* cast. None of his impressions of them is entirely accurate because they incorporate his monotone voice, his gestures, and his flat facial expression. Annie keeps asking to talk to Abed, but Abed acts as though he no longer exists. He tells her that he is playing “a simulation being run through a filter of other people’s needs. Abed’s been filtered out because nobody needs him.” Annie’s suggestion that he become more empathetic greatly hurts Abed because he feels as though she is saying that his own personality is worthless. When she finally “finds” Abed by imitating him, he imagines himself chained inside a locker, explaining to her, “It’s a place where people like me get put when everyone’s fed up with us.” Annie explains to him that his “simulations” actually are a manifestation of the anxieties that he shares with everyone, and with that knowledge she frees him from his imaginary bonds.

One of the most iconic scenes in the Oscar-winning film *Rain Man* occurs when Charlie and Raymond Babbit ride down an escalator of a casino wearing matching tailor-made, gray suits. It is perhaps the only moment in the movie that they actually look like brothers, that they are “cut from the same cloth.” What is more, Raymond Babbit actually looks “normal,” even attractive. This scene becomes significant when considering prior scenes discussing clothing. Raymond’s need for consistency insists that he must buy all his clothes from K-Mart in Cincinnati at a specific address; he refuses to wear briefs that his brother purchased for him because they are too tight for his comfort. Charlie, however, cannot accept this limitation; at one point in their journey, he stops the

car just so he can yell, "What difference does it make where you buy underwear? What difference does it make? Underwear is underwear! It is underwear wherever you buy it, in Cincinnati or wherever! You know what I think, Ray? I think this autism is a bunch of shit 'cause you can't tell me you're not in there somewhere!" There is some significance to the fact that Charlie links Raymond's specific sartorial choices to his autism. Charlie's vulgarity and frustration primarily respond to Raymond's autistic behaviors.

In light of this scene, it seems remarkable that Raymond can abide donning the grey suit in Las Vegas. Nevertheless, he does, and he and Charlie have a memorable conversation about it at the casino:

> Charlie: He did a great job on that suit. You don't realize how good you look. Do you like it?
>
> Raymond: It's not K-Mart.
>
> Charlie: How could you not like that suit? You look fantastic, Ray. How can you not like that suit?
>
> Raymond: It's not a K-Mart suit.
>
> Charlie: I'm going to let you in on a little secret.
>
> Raymond: Yeah.
>
> Charlie: K-Mart sucks. Okay?
>
> Raymond: Yeah.

In this conversation, and also in the success that the brothers share in gambling at the casino, Raymond Babbit is taught this lesson: costume matters more than K-Mart. If he

wants to be noticeable, attractive, and successful, he has to wear society's clothes. It seems this is a lesson that Raymond takes with him. At the end of the movie, Raymond wears a suit to meet his caretaker, who asks him, "Wouldn't you be more relaxed in your favorite K-Mart clothes?" Raymond replies by repeating Charlie's comment regarding K-Mart.

These examples do not follow Davis's ideas about what disguises do because they resist selfhood. Rather, these choices suggest, as Britta said, that if autistic people present themselves as who they really are they will not be liked. The only way to be fully accepted in a predominantly neurotypical society is to costume the autistic person successfully and to have him act "normal," that is, neurotypical. However, as many of these examples demonstrate, for an autistic person, that may not be possible. Even when autistic people succeed in passing for neurotypical, they must become different people, as shown in the dramatic changes Abed displays in his portrayal of the character from *My Dinner with Andre* or how Jerry changes with the addition of his cigarette; both of these options are still perceived as undesirable to neurotypicals with whom they interact. Again, it is intriguing that the media recognizes such a change; these examples demonstrate the difference that these characters have with the rest of society and how they cannot seem to conform no matter how hard they try, but they also question what a "cure" for autism would really do. Would it substitute someone completely different in the place of the autistic person who has been "cured"?

Siebers concludes that "The masquerade counteracts passing, claiming disability rather than concealing it . . . . The masquerade fulfills the desire to tell a story steeped in

disability, often the very story that society does not want to hear, by refusing to obey the ideology of ability" (118). If neurotypicality is a masquerade, autistic people do not need it. Woodward, on the other hand, suggests that the masquerade can simultaneously represent a "submission to dominant social codes and as resistance to them" (125). Grandin arguably discovered this dichotomy when she dressed formally but donned cattle pins to demonstrate her "rank," expressing her interest and identity while submitting to the sartorial code. Likewise, Donald Morton wears a suit to work but hangs his whale costume on the coat rack, year-round, effectively recognizing both identities. Obviously, this "happy medium" is not easily realized, but it is perhaps possible.

The costume metaphor is both powerful and positive because it recognizes that autistic people have their own, unique identities. It may be that costumes provide a way for autistic people to more comfortably "reveal who [they] really [are]." However, through further examining the costume metaphor, a conflict between autistic and neurotypical becomes clear, and arguably suggests that an autistic identity is preferred. Autistic people cannot adopt the neurotypical sartorial code. For the "maskless masquerade" to remain natural, autistic people must maintain a sartorial code of their own, and neurotypicals must recognize it as acceptable.

The Detective Motif

It seems no small coincidence that most of the television characters selected for this study are, in some form or another, detectives. They each have different specialties and methods, but they fit comfortably in the mystery genre, particularly for classic, analytical, "soft-boiled" detective fiction. Most of them are professional and are

associated with law enforcement. Detective Robert Goren from *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* is the only one officially with the "force." Adrian Monk (*Monk*) is a former detective working as a consultant with the police. Dr. Temperance Brennan, Dr. Zack Addy (both from *Bones*), and Dr. Spencer Reid (from *Criminal Minds*) all consult with the FBI on murder cases.

There are others who are not associated with any kind of law enforcement but who still solve mysteries on a regular basis. Jerry Espenson, from *Boston Legal*, is a lawyer, and though his career is meant to present his client favorably, in criminal cases he sometimes uses his detective skills to prove that his client is innocent. Dr. Gregory House is a doctor, and though he investigates pathology, his interest is in solving medical mysteries, and his character is based on Sherlock Holmes. Other autistic characters have been seen figuratively taking up the magnifying glass when necessary. When Abed Nadir from *Community* suspects foul play, he takes on the guise and persona of various detectives in popular culture, specifically Batman ("Foosball and Nocturnal Vigilantism") and a parody of *Doctor Who* named Inspector Spacetime ("Curriculum Unavailable"), to help him pursue the game afoot. Dr. Sheldon Cooper and the other characters of *The Big Bang Theory* seem to view themselves as detectives of mysteries of the universe. Cooper once claimed that his job description, in an Einstein-esque manner, is "to tear the mask off nature and stare at the face of God" ("The Benefactor Factor"). He also implies that his eventual goal as a theoretical physicist is to postulate a grand unified theory that will "explain everything" ("The Zazzy Substitution").

The autistic detective is not a phenomenon limited to television but also occurs in popular literature. As mentioned previously, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon, a novel narrated by a teenager who apparently has Asperger's Syndrome, is also a mystery. It is Christopher Boone's interest in classic detective stories that motivates him to discover who killed his neighbor's pet dog, and the title of the novel is inspired by one of Sherlock Holmes's most famous quotations from the story "Silver Blaze." Similarly, Stieg Larsson's book *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2008) features a young detective named Lisbeth Salander who is incredibly gifted in memory and intelligence but who is also very socially distant. As she complains about her differences to another character, calling herself a "freak," the other character silently wonders if Lisbeth has Asperger's Syndrome (551-52).

Yet, arguably, this trend of autistic detectives goes back even farther. Some avid mystery readers say it began with the most famous fictional detective of all time, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Brilliance combined with social aloofness and eccentricities have caused some Conan Doyle readers to ponder if Holmes may be on the spectrum. This conjecture is largely a matter of popular opinion, but some scholars have written essays pondering the topic, including A. Michael Maher ("Was Sherlock Holmes Autistic?") and writer for the *Psychology Today* blog *Brain Snacks* Karl Albrecht ("Did Sherlock Holmes Have Asperger's Syndrome?"). Michael Fitzgerald, who has proposed several posthumous diagnoses of famous figures in the humanities, postulates that Holmes's autistic traits might be apparent because Conan Doyle demonstrated autistic traits (80-86). Recent popular culture versions of the Holmes mysteries pursue this

theory. The creators of *House, Law and Order: Criminal Intent,* and *Monk* all admit that their characters are based on characters from the Holmes mysteries, which may be an explanation why these recent interpretations of Holmes display autistic traits. The BBC series *Sherlock* even questions directly if Holmes is autistic, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Even if Holmes is not autistic, the selected television characters certainly echo his legacy. They are not ordinary detectives; they are summoned to solve the most baffling and high-risk crimes, and they are nearly always successful in bringing those guilty parties to justice. These autistic detectives' methods often mystify onlookers but silence naysayers. Monk looks as if he regularly does the impossible as he solves multiple "locked room mysteries." Defense Attorney Carver often has doubts about Detective Goren's intuitions, but Goren only responds by proving to be right. If not confused by their methods, witnesses often marvel at the detectives' techniques and specialties. For example, when he first meets Dr. Brennan, Agent Seeley Booth argues with her that she is destroying valuable evidence when she removes flesh from a murder victim, but she replies, "On the contrary, I am *revealing* evidence" ("The Parts in the Sum of the Whole"). The idea that evidence of murder can be found in bones is one with which Booth struggles early in his partnership with Brennan; in the pilot he tells her, "Scientists don't solve murders; cops do." Yet Brennan and her team at the Jeffersonian prove again and again that her science can and does solve a case just as effectively as do the police.

Given what popular culture understands about autism, there are other professions that lend themselves to an easy association with a diagnosis on the spectrum, such as

eccentric scientists or absent-minded professors. Yet, why are there so many detectives in popular culture who appear autistic? When one examines the accepted conventions of detective fiction, one sees traits consistent with autistic behavior. Popular culture has recognized these curious similarities and has reflected them in detective characters.

First, it is understood that a good detective is extremely observant. In S. S. Van Dime's famous "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories," (1928) rule six states, "[The Detective's] function is to gather clues that will eventually lead to the person who did the dirty work [early]; and if the detective does not reach his conclusions through an analysis of those clues, he has no more solved his problem than the schoolboy who gets his answer out of the back of the arithmetic [book]" (190). A detective has to be observant in order to spot clues. Edgar Allen Poe's Auguste Dupin and Conan Doyle's Holmes are both good at making observation an art. Holmes, especially, has a knack for noticing a wealth of seemingly irrelevant minutia about people and then using that information to develop inferences that he refers to as "deductions" (Binyon 10-11). In the same way, autistic television detectives use their unique vision to find the tiny details (missed by most people) which slam a case shut. Sometimes they gather their observations in unusual ways, such as Monk pacing the crime scene with his hands spread in front of him, or Goren standing on a platform above a murder scene to get a different angle.

Autistic people have the capacity to be keenly aware of detail. As stated in Chapter One, the *DSM* diagnosis lists as a symptom of autism "persistent preoccupation with parts of objects." A neurotypical observer might tend to focus more on the persons

involved and the social aspects of a case, but an autistic person might be drawn to minute details of a crime scene and notice vital clues. This could be an area where lack of eye contact is beneficial; averted eyes might notice something everyone else misses. It is certainly not unheard of for an autistic person to perceive or to interpret the world differently than neurotypical people do. Therefore, an autistic person could very possibly notice something that neurotypical people do not. The problem is that an autistic individual may not naturally be able to explain or to understand such clues as readily as a detective would. For that, perhaps extra training would be necessary.

Another trait of analytical detectives is profound intelligence. Finding clues is only the first step in solving a crime; making deductions based on those clues is the second step. Some of the best detectives in literature have an encyclopedic amount of knowledge and an impressive, if not eidetic, memory. These features are arguably the most memorable and notable traits of analytical detectives. As previously discussed, all of the selected television characters have these traits in common, and though it is not an official criterion of an autism diagnosis, many autistic people possess these traits also. Some interpretations of intelligence in these television characters rather vividly emphasize an autistic frame of mind. For example, in one episode of *Criminal Minds* as Reid is piecing a string of clues together, he starts talking to himself, and pictures of the clues flash before his face ("The Fisher King Part II"). In the *Sherlock* episode "The Hounds of Baskerville," Holmes shoos everyone out of the room, including Watson, so that he may retreat into his "mind palace." While in that state, Holmes sees everything he knows about the clues appearing before him, and he sorts through them until they make

sense. These dramatic depictions both are reminiscent of the idea that autistic people think in pictures.

The next trait does not have so much to do with the ability to solve a case as much as it does with the detective's character, and it certainly is consistent with autistic behavior: social distance. Another one of Van Dine's rules points to this trait, that a murder mystery must not have a love interest, explaining that "The business in hand is to bring a criminal to the bar of justice, not to bring a lovelorn couple to the hymeneal altar" (189-90). Of course, several detectives in literature and especially in television break that rule, but the selected television detectives usually resist romantic relationships. Even if they do engage in such a relationship, it is either very brief or takes a very long time to develop.

Beyond romance, though, the notion that the detective is aloof and distant is probably not so much a rule as it is a tradition, which probably started with Sherlock Holmes. Vincett Starrett in his essay on Holmes's character cites the passage in "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1933), stating that Holmes "'loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul'" and argues that this line does not mean that Holmes is a misanthrope. "The word *society* is poorly chosen," Starrett states. "What Watson . . . intended to convey was that *social life* offended the Bohemian soul of his companion" (147, emphasis Starrett's). Many later detectives, including the "hard-boiled" detectives, appear as loners, not interested in having lovers or making friends. As Van Dine implies in his romance rule, the detective's social life is not the focus of the story. The detective's function is not to make friends but to solve murders. Of course, the reason

most detectives are aloof is not because they do not understand people or how to socialize, but because they choose to be detached. However, the television characters under discussionhere definitely have social deficits and, being autistic, cannot choose to be adeptly interpersonal. Still, crime detection is one vocation in which having social deficits may be advantageous.

The final trait of fictional detectives that is applicable to autism is eccentricity. This also is not a "rule," but Gary Niebuhr in his detective fiction guide *Make Mine a Mystery* (2003) notes that eccentric detectives compose a popular sub-genre of amateur detectives because they make for entertaining fiction (37). This might have to do with the convention that one must be a little odd to be a genius. Therefore awkward behaviors, like stimming, could be seen as part of a detective's peculiar thought process. The television characters discussed in this study certainly do have many eccentricities, and that is part of what makes them memorable and popular.

There are also some ways that these television detectives have demonstrated evolution in the detective fiction genre. One is in the detective's character development. Generally, mystery fiction is not about the detective but is about the crime. The detective's function is to solve the crime, to provide the story's *deus ex machina*. Therefore, very little of the detective's personal life or background is revealed. The television detectives, however, are more complex characters than their literary predecessors. Their personalities, background stories, and interests all contribute to their function as characters and add more human interest. This is especially true for Dr. Brennan and Monk, who both strive to solve a personal mystery related to their pasts.

For Dr. Brennan, this personal mystery concerns the disappearance of her parents, which she solves in the first two seasons of the show. For Monk, it is solving the death of his wife Trudy, which is ongoing throughout the series. Following these personal mysteries adds more drama to the series and causes the audience to sympathize with the characters.

Another aspect of detective fiction that changes in these television detectives can be seen in the form of the sidekick. In another set of rules, Ronald A. Knox's "Detective Stories Decalogue" (1929), the ninth commandment is that the sidekick be a fool with intelligence slightly below the reader's. In Knox's words, "[I]f [a sidekick] does exist, he exists for the purpose of letting the reader have a sparring partner, as it were, against whom he can pit his brains. 'I may have been a fool,' he says to himself as he puts the book down, 'but at least I wasn't such a doddering fool as poor old Watson'" (196). The television detectives in this study sometimes have assistants, but they are by no means fools. In fact, their function is to fill gaps in the social, psychological, or physical deficits of the detectives and to perform tasks that the detectives cannot. Dr. Brennan interprets forensic evidence, but Booth analyzes suspects in interrogation, which Brennan is unable to do since she does not understand people socially. Monk's assistants, Sharona and Natalie, both allow him to function by performing all the small tasks that Monk is unable to do because of his limiting condition. Certainly John Watson in the BBC's *Sherlock* is not a "doddering fool." After all, he is a doctor, and he serves as a sensible, reasonable character, even acting as Holmes's conscience who tells him when he is not being socially appropriate, much in the same way Dr. Wilson does for Dr. House. The

detectives' sidekicks exist to facilitate the solution because the detectives cannot always do it alone.

With all these depictions of autistic detectives, one might read this motif as a stereotype. It suggests that autistic people can only be detectives or that they all have the amazing mental skills that these detectives do, but that is not always the case in reality. Disability Studies critic Michael Bérubé argues in his essay "Disability and Narrative" (2005) that popular culture makes the case that it is only worth having a disability if one can do something exceptional with it. He uses several examples, including *Monk*:

> [T]his linkage is simply a reversal of the more familiar narrative dynamic in which disability is rendered as exceptionality and thereby redeemed—as when Dumbo finds that the source of his shame is actually the source of his power. This narrative "redemption" of disability is, however, slightly different from the *Rain Man* logic by which it turns out to be a good idea to bring your autistic brother to Las Vegas to count cards for when you leave Vegas, your brother is still autistic, whereas in the rendering of disability as exceptionality, the disability itself effectively disappears. To take an example from contemporary television, Tony Shalhoub's obsessive-compulsive detective, Monk, shows us that OCD is a particularly good disability for a detective to have, raising the possibility that certain kinds of disability make one a more able participant in certain kinds of narrative—since detective fiction is almost always recursive,

> rewarding those characters in the narrative who are the most capable readers of the tropes of detective fiction. (569)

In the context of his discussion of "redemption narratives," Bérubé's comment impliesthat Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is only useful if one can solve a murder with it. Unless disability is a source of strength, it is a source of shame.

The above argument does have merit but only if the motif is regarded negatively. One can regard some more positive aspects of the autistic detective. First, it is worth mentioning that popular culture does not suggest that one must have autism or some other disability to be an accomplished detective. For instance, two other successful mystery shows, *Psych* and *The Mentalist*, feature protagonists who solve mysteries simply by being extremely observant; it is through cunning charisma that these characters advance the ruse that they have amazing psychic abilities. In *Elementary,* the Americanized version of *Sherlock,* Sherlock Holmes has no indication of autism; this show focuses more on his recovery as a heroin addict. Also, in some of this study's selected shows, such as *Criminal Minds*, autistic detectives work as part of a team composed mainly of neurotypicals, each with a different specialty and each just as capable of solving crimes.

Mostly, however, the detective motif suggests that people with autism can contribute to society in a positive way. Autistic detective characters use both their strengths and weaknesses to an advantage. These shows do not necessarily say that an autistic person must be a detective; they suggest finding ways to use all aspects of an individual to have a positive impact on society. In fact, both the metaphor of the masquerade and the detective motif demonstrate that autistic people do have a place in

society, and both suggest that autistic people's place in society is best expressed when it is on their terms. Autistic people are most useful to society when they are allowed to don a persona that reveals and highlights the particular strengths they have to offer.

CHAPTER 6

Autism's Misconstrued Trifecta: Honesty, Innocence, and Violence

Some personality traits commonly portrayed in autistic characters are not found in the *DSM*. Perhaps these qualities are based on eccentricities of real autistic individuals, but translated through popular culture such behaviors can be misappropriated or misunderstood. As a result, these traits which include honesty, innocence, and violence may be mistakenly transferred to typify autistic people in general.

Autism and the Truth

Most characters identified with autistic characteristics in this study demonstrate a dislike and/or a discomfort with lying. When these characters are confronted with deceit, they react unusually; and if required to tell a lie, they are not believable. Such moments of distress are manifested usually in brief lines in dialogue, especially in the films, but they may occupy a place of greater significance within the piece. For example in *Adam,* as part of his explanation of Asperger's Syndrome, Adam tells Beth, "Most aspies are really honest." He also throws a tantrum after he realizes that Beth has lied to him. In *My Name is Khan,* Mandira is amazed by Rizvan Khan's honesty and says, "A salesman, and yet you speak the truth!" Khan immediately replies, "Always, always."

Sheldon Cooper expresses his discomfort regarding lying on a number of occasions. The episode that best shows this aspect of Sheldon's personality is "The Loobenfeld Decay." Leonard and Sheldon hear Penny singing and find it to be terrible. She informs them that she is practicing for a part in a musical and invites them to attend,

but Leonard lies to Penny, saying that he and Sheldon have other plans. Sheldon later approaches Leonard asking him why he could not simply tell Penny the truth, suggesting that Leonard should have said, "Singing is neither an appropriate vocation nor avocation for you, and if you disagree, I recommend you have a CAT scan to look for a tumor pressing on the cognitive processing centers of your brain." Leonard explains that it is social convention to be mindful of another person's feelings. Then, as Sheldon considers the lie, he becomes anxious that Penny will discover the truth. So he develops an extremely convoluted, or in Sheldon's words "un-unravelable," fabrication to replace Leonard's lie, but as Sheldon continues to analyze his deceitful scenario he finds more and more inconsistencies and subsequently piles on even more elaborate lies to cover these. The whole situation, though hilarious, causes Sheldon a great deal of anxiety, with the result that lying is a tactic that Sheldon leaves in reserve and rarely uses.

Dr. Brennan demonstrates a great deal of discomfort with deceit in the episode "The Santa in the Slush." She is bothered by all the lies that adults tell to children at Christmas time regarding Santa, and then Booth encourages her to tell a personal lie for her brother Russ to his children. She tells Dr. Sweets, "Booth, who is a very honest person, says that at this time of year deception is necessary for the happiness of little children." Sweets explains to her why deception is socially acceptable during the holidays using intellectual, psychiatric language in an attempt to make the argument seem more reasonable. Brennan accepts his argument and rationalizes it into a social convention. She tells Russ that she agrees to help because "It's not morally wrong to lie at Christmas . . . . Apparently, sometimes lying is a kind of gift. I'm hazy on the rules,

but the idea is even if they [children] know you're lying, they know you're doing it out of love."

Bones returns to the subject of lying in the episode "The Pinocchio in the Platter" in which the characters experiment with "radical honesty," telling the truth regardless of the consequences. Brennan is one of the few people who believe this philosophy is "the best policy," and she has a discussion with Booth and Sweets about why they disagree:

> Bones: I see no reason why telling the truth would be considered aggressive.
>
> Sweets: It is when you do it without exception. I mean, the small fictions that we call "white lies" play a crucial role in human interactions.
>
> Booth: It's the glue that holds us together.
>
> Bones: How? A world without lies would be far more efficient.
>
> Booth: If no one had any feelings, but people do.

She then dares Booth to tell her an instance in which he lied to her, but he hesitates. She asks him again later and acts as though it really hurts her that he will not honor her request. She tells him, "You think you're protecting me, but by avoiding the truth you inevitably cause greater harm."

In *Community*, when Abed believes Troy's sarcasm and Troy explains to Abed that he is just "messing" with him, Abed immediately tries to do the same with Troy. Troy asks if he has ever experienced sarcasm, and Abed responds, "Yes. Just kidding, no. Like that? This isn't a table. (Laughs) That's funny." Because of Abed's misunderstanding of this social convention, Troy eventually tells Abed they will not

"mess" with each other anymore ("Advanced Criminal Law"). Abed does not forget this episode and remains steadfastly truthful with all his friends. He experiences some anxiety in the third season when Troy disapproves of something Abed is doing but chooses not to tell Abed that he finds this behavior annoying. When Troy confesses his true feelings, Abed replies, "We never lie. We made a deal October 15, 2009, friends don't lie to each other" ("Contemporary Impressionists").

In "Mr. Monk and the Red Herring," the first episode that features Natalie Teeger, Natalie encourages Monk to support her in a lie. Monk protests saying he is not good at lying, but Natalie replies, "Are you a man? Then you can lie; that's what men do." However, Monk's lie is so pitiful that Natalie is forced to admit the truth. After this, she exasperatedly tells Monk, "You really are the worst liar in the whole world . . . . An honest man, who'd have thunk it?"

However, the abject honesty ascribed to autistic characters by popular culture is an exaggeration, especially employed in stand-alone episodes having guest autistic characters. In the following examples, popular culture has advanced the idea that autistic people are incapable of comprehending anything less than the truth. On an episode of *Cold Case* called "Saving Sammy" which features a case involving an autistic child, one policeman encourages the detectives to accept the child's testimony, claiming that it is impossible for autistic people to lie. On an episode of *In Plain Sight* that features a character with Asperger's Syndrome, one of the co-stars explains, "it's difficult for most people with Asperger's to lie or to even grasp the concept of lying" ("Her Days are Numbered"). There is nothing in the *DSM* diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders to

support these claims. The misunderstanding of social mores that sometimes leads an autistic person to be "brutally honest" or rude may contribute to the notion that autistic people understand only truth, but that social blind spot does not mean that an autistic individual cannot intentionally lie. In some cases, autistic people are familiar with the concept of lying but choose not to lie for moral reasons, perhaps in fear of doing something they have been taught is wrong.

Nevertheless, there are some autistic characters that challenge this stereotype. Dr. House and Detective Goren are often deceitful and manipulative. Dr. Reid also is adept at using ruses and lying if necessary. For instance, in the episode "Minimal Loss," Reid successfully feigns his solidarity to a cult leader in order to protect members of the cult. Jerry Espenson once committed perjury concerning his opinion of the death penalty ("Trick or Treat"). However, perhaps the best show that currently challenges this stereotype is *Alphas*. When the team suspects that a "mole" is among them, the autistic character Gary Bell says he is not a traitor and provides an alibi. The other characters believe him, reasoning that "Gary can't lie," yet Gary answers, "But I *can* lie! I've been practicing; it's a social skill!" ("The Unusual Suspects"). This does not mean that honesty is a negative or a positive attribute, but the implication promoted by autistic characters that cannot lie, ironically, does not present the whole truth.

On the other hand, another side of this honesty issue is also significant. Not only do many autistic characters avoid lies, they relentlessly pursue truth. Truth is viewed as sacred, more important than anything else, and these characters seek it no matter what others say or feel or whatever circumstances arise. This is generally perceived as an

underlying autistic attitude, perhaps akin to obsession. In detective characters, such pursuit of the truth is the driving force that keeps them on the case until it is solved. In *Sherlock,* Holmes risks his life more than once to discover the truth of his cases, such as when he pursues the cab driver who killed four people and threatens to kill Holmes as well ("A Study in Pink"). Sometimes truth is equated with personal relationships, as when Abed equates friendship with telling the truth or Adam Raki equates truth with love and nearly dissolves his relationship with Beth when he discovers that she lied to him.

This idea is eloquently expressed in a conversation from an episode of *Bones.* On "The Boy in the Tree," Dr. Brennan and her friend Angela Montenegro discuss the case's victim:

> Angela: Honey, did you ever just believe something, despite the evidence, just know it was true?
>
> Brennan: No. I've hoped things, but I've always known the difference between hope and fact. You know, all that's left of this boy is a table full of bones. Now everyone he's ever known has an agenda–his parents, his school, even the cop investigating his death. You know, I'm the only one who cares about the truth of what Nestor's life came to in the end, good or bad! And I know the truth is more important than anything else!
>
> Angela: You know, or you hope it's true?
>
> Brennan: Suicide is the most rational, logical explanation. What I believe doesn't matter. What makes me sad doesn't matter.

> Angela: (shows her artistic rendering of the victim) Look at this face! He did not kill himself.
>
> Brennan: Angela, I need a little more proof than a nice drawing.
>
> Angela: I can do that. (Hands her the drawing and leaves)

In this discussion, Dr. Brennan makes it clear that emotion, opinion, or any other form of *pathos* does not persuade her. She wants nothing more and nothing less than the truth. This explains why throughout the series she does not allow her employees to make "intuitive leaps" or "educated guesses." No matter how reasonable such suggestions may seem, they are not facts. In another episode, she reveals that this is also the reason she continuously uses the scientific terminology of her field. Once, when presiding as an expert witness in a case, Dr. Brennan becomes aware that she loses the jury's focus because of such daunting terminology. So she concludes her testimony by simplifying her language and saying, "These facts can't be ignored or dismissed because you think I'm boring and obnoxious, because I don't matter. What I feel doesn't matter" ("The Girl in the Fridge").

Brennan's ideas echo qualities described in virtue epistemology, the branch of philosophy that specifically investigates beliefs and ethics. Lorraine Code, one of the pioneers in this field, describes these qualities in her book *Epistemic Responsibility* (1987) as she describes what makes one intellectually virtuous:

> How then are we to delineate more precisely the nature of an intellectually virtuous character? I have maintained that intellectual virtue is, primarily, a matter of orientation toward the world and toward oneself as a

> knowledge-seeker in the world. Pursuing this point a little further, it is helpful to think of intellectual goodness as having a realist orientation. It is only those who, in their knowing, strive to do justice to the *object*—to the *world* they want to know as well as possible—who can aspire to intellectual virtue . . . . Intellectually virtuous persons value knowing and understanding how things really are. They resist the temptation to live with partial explanations where fuller ones are attainable; they resist the temptation to live in fantasy or in a world of dream or illusion, considering it better to know, despite the tempting comfort and complacency of life of fantasy or illusion (or one well tinged with fantasy or illusion) . . . . For the intellectually virtuous, knowledge is good in itself, not just instrumentally good. (58-59, emphasis Code's)

Brennan espouses these virtues. She sees the difference between truth and hope, and she pursues truth for its own sake. She understands that she cannot accept what she hopes to be true, and she demonstrates this by not relying on her own feelings or others' opinions. Intuitive leaps are only partial truths, and Brennan knows that fuller explanations are better. Her resistance to fantasy is perhaps one of the reasons she refuses to believe anything regarding religion and only studies such topics for their anthropological value. Perhaps the one quality she needs to improve is humility as a "knowledge-seeker." Dr. Brennan tends to be perceived as arrogant because she honestly believes herself to the best in her field. Furthermore, she often approaches with ambivalence and condescension

other fields in which she has little knowledge, like psychology. Yet she improves as she continues to interact with Dr. Sweets and Agent Booth.

Another character shares these epistemological principles. One of the first clues for Adrian Monk that something is amiss in a case often happens when an alibi does not match with facts. In such situations, Monks usually complains, “It doesn’t make sense.” In one episode, Captain Leland Stottlemeyer exasperatedly replies to the obsessive detective, “Does everything *have* to make sense, Monk?” Monk hesitates for a couple of seconds and then replies, somewhat apologetically, “Well yeah, it kind of does” (“Mr. Monk and the Other Woman”). This brief conversation actually reveals a great deal about both characters and how they view the world. Stottlemeyer has accepted the idea that not everything in life makes sense and can back up this hypothesis with personal experience. For example, from the pilot episode it is revealed that Stottlemeyer has marital problems and that he does not understand why his marriage is failing because he loves his wife. To Monk, however, believing that not everything makes sense is accepting a partial truth, and a fuller explanation exists. That is why Monk seeks for everything to have a logical explanation, another manifestation of his obsession with order. Ironically, Monk’s personal life makes less sense than Stottlemeyer’s because Trudy’s murder and Monk’s own disorder do not have an easy, logical explanation. Some questions about Monk’s life, such as why Trudy married him in the first place, are never fully answered in the series. Yet Monk’s persistent pursuit of logical explanations is one of the keys to his uncanny ability to solve mysteries.

If there were a greater understanding of virtue epistemology in the general population, the honesty traits expressed in these characters might lead to a richer perception of autism. An orientation toward knowledge-seeking certainly reveals much more than the mere assumption that autistic people are unable to lie or to understand anything fabricated. This comparison to intellectually virtuous individuals gives better comprehension of why these characters are the way that they are. Like the "maskless masquerade" discussed in the previous chapter, virtue epistemology is another way of expressing autistic people's desire to understand the world better.

Autistic Innocence

Though some might consider innocence to be a quality that is somewhat ambiguous characteristic, nevertheless, it has significance since more than one of these works specifically draws attention to it. Pervasive innocence also may invoke another common misconception regarding autism, that it affects only children. As mentioned in Chapter One, Autism Speaks often disregards the contributions of autistic adults and focuses almost exclusively on the deficits of autistic children. Thus, the public comes to believe that autism is a condition that negatively affects only children. In *Representing Autism*, Stuart Murray comments on this trend and how it distorts perceptions of autism:

> Pervasive and present, autism is not something one grows out of. And yet, given that this is the case, contemporary cultural fascination with autism nevertheless focuses on the figure of the child when seeking to explore what autism is and what it might mean . . . . Even though it is obvious that children with autism will become adults with autism, the sense that the

> condition somehow affects children *more* than adults is itself pervasive. Again and again in contemporary cultural narratives, it is the child who carries the weight of what we wish to say or think about the condition, and it is through a focus on children that autism is increasingly being understood. (139)

Therefore, it might seem unusual that out of the several characters selected for this study, only one, Max Braverman from *Parenthood*, is a child. Most of the selected characters range from early twenties to middle age. Yet there is another trend observed in the adult autistic characters selected for this discussion that is related to society's skewed focus toward autistic children. Most of these characters possess strikingly childlike characteristics; they look young, and if they do not, they act young. All of them are somewhat naïve and not entirely mature, certainly not as socially and emotionally mature asthe "norm" for their chronological age group. Even though these characters are adults, they all demonstrate a childlike innocence.

Of course, there are different kinds of innocence, but for this part of the discussion the various concepts of innocence do not always apply. Gary Cross considers two kinds of innocence in his book *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Culture* (2004). The first form of innocence is the Lockean idea of "sheltered innocence," which involves keeping a child sequestered from the world, away from society's corruptions, so that he may remain unblemished and pure in moral conduct. The other innocence that Cross examines is what he calls "wondrous innocence," which recognizes the joyous way in which a child experiences the world.

The first view encourages self-mastery, discipline, and safety, keeping a child from growing up too rapidly. The other is an image of a perpetually carefree child never maturing beyond having fun all the time, but Cross argues that such a lifestyle is often fueled by materialism (13-14).

The "innocence" conveyed in the television shows chosen for this study portrays elements of both categories identified by Cross. For example, on *The Big Bang Theory*, after going on a date with the comic book storeowner Stuart, Penny invites him to her apartment for, in her words, "coffee or something." Stuart replies that it is too late in the evening to ingest so much caffeine, completely misunderstanding the implication that Penny is not really interested in coffee at all. His demonstration of sheltered innocence touches Penny, and she responds, "Oh, you think coffee means coffee. That's so sweet" ("The Hofstadter Isotope"). And on *Boston Legal,* in the episode when Jerry Espenson inappropriately wears a Halloween costume, his employer Carl Sacks rebukes him saying, "This is a very grown-up place, Jerry. Halloween is a kids' thing." However, Katie Lloyd comes to Jerry's defense, explaining to Sacks that Jerry "never let die the child within" ("Happy Trails"), demonstrating that she appreciates Jerry's portrayal of wondrous innocence. Both kinds of innocence play important parts in these autistic characters, but there is more to this impression of innocence, which has to do with the reality that they look and act so youthful. There is a strong implication that even though these characters are autonomous adults with strengths and intelligence, they remain essentially children, sometimes exhibiting helplessness and dependence. Therefore, these grown-up characters display child-like, autistic innocence.

This kind of innocence works both in favor of these characters and against them. On the one hand, it makes the characters endearing. The genuineness of this innocence, perhaps, causes the audience to be a bit more invested in them. Chuck Lorre, co-creator of *The Big Bang Theory*, defends his characters' endearing innocence in a beside-the-scenes feature for season two:

> When I care about the characters in the show, then the drama and the comedy mean more. And there's a wonderful innocence to these characters. They're authentic, there's no manipulation or subterfuge, they are what they are, and that's really refreshing. I think these characters, especially as embodied by these actors, give that opportunity for the audience to care. ("Testing the Infinite Hilarity")

Of course, it is not just the audience who finds this form of innocence endearing. Neurotypical characters are often drawn to autistic characters by this quality. However, there is another side of autistic innocence that may not be as desirable: sometimes autistic characters display that innocence can act as a detriment to profession.

For example, at the beginning of the *Bones* episode "Judas on a Pole," Zack Addy is giving the oral defense for his dissertation. He demonstrates knowledge and professionalism in his vocabulary despite his youthful appearance, shoulder-length hair, and casual clothes. Nevertheless, one of the committee members asks him, "How do you expect anyone to take you seriously as a working forensic anthropologist when you look the way you do?" Similarly, when Zack asks Dr. Camille Saroyan if he can continue working at the Jeffersonian after he obtains his doctorate, she doubts the effectiveness in

his ability to appear as an expert witness, which is part of the job. She tells him, "Jurors have to take you seriously, and frankly, you look like a weekend fill-in at a college radio station." Desperate, he goes to Angela asking for fashion advice. She gets him a suit and cuts his hair; suddenly, he looks credible. He gets his doctorate, and Cam hires him. To the end of season three, he keeps his hair short. The experience teaches Zack that he cannot be seriously considered a professional, despite his intelligence, unless he looks more mature.

On *Boston Legal* Alan Shore tells Jerry Espenson, "There's no doubt in my mind that you could develop into a first-rate defender, Jerry, but my hope is that you don't. Even at your relatively mature age, you're still innocent . . . . There's a reason why Shakespeare and many after him said, 'First, kill all the lawyers.' They're talking about people like me, Jerry, not you" ("Ivan the Incorrigible"). In some ways, this is genuine, friendly advice that causes these two characters to bond, but it also sounds as though Alan is suggestingthat Jerry will never be an effective lawyer. This discussion is recalled the first time Alan and Jerry are opposing counsel. Alan warns Jerry that he can reduce Jerry to what he really is, a "bumbling, inarticulate man with Asperger's." Jerry is greatly upset by that pronouncement, and when Alan sees how despondent Jerry is, Alan apologizes and offers to settle out of court. Yet he also explains that what he just did to Jerry is common practice among lawyers. He ends their discussion by saying, "Jerry, you'll recall I once advised you to flee the practice of law because it's an ugly occupation which calls upon its participants to do ugly things. I'm very . . . accomplished in the

practice of law, Jerry" ("The Good Lawyer"). The implication, of course, is that Jerry is not accomplished, and there is a question as to whether he ever will be.

In the pilot episode of *Criminal Minds*, as Aaron Hotchner introduces the team, he addresses Spencer Reid as Special Agent Reid. Jason Gideon immediately corrects him, saying "*Doctor* Reid." Later in the episode, Reid asks Hotchner why Gideon made the correction. Hotchner answers simply, "Because he knows that people see you as a kid, and he wants to make sure that they respect you." Having three PhDs and working for the FBI are not enough to garner respect because Reid looks young and innocent.

However, there could be some validity to this motif. Autism is a developmental disorder, and maturity is typically, significantly delayed in autistic individuals. Some autistic people on the lower end of the spectrum may have developmental delays compounded by various forms of intellectual disability, enhancing the manifestation of innocence. Of course, this is not always the case; some autistic people seem mature for their chronological age, such as Ari Ne'eman and Temple Grandin. Innocence ought to be a positive aspect, but it has negative undertones that society frequently misconstrues. Portrayals of innocence in popular autistic characters seem to promote exactly the kind of negative message Autism Speaks suggests, that there will never be a place in the world of acceptance or respect for those with autism. Despite whatever intelligence they may display or however much they contribute to the world, they will forever be judged by their youthful demeanor and will never be taken seriously.

The portrayals of autistic characters in this study suggest that they must prove themselves to be responsible before acceptance can begin, as the three above examples

illustrate. Zack Addy continues to perform well with the team, so much so that he gets the President's attention, who sends him to the Iraq war ("Stargazer in a Puddle"). Jerry Espenson does prove to be an effective attorney, even winning the next case when he presides as opposing counsel to Alan Shore ("Guise and Dolls"). Reid reveals his brilliance throughout the series, though he does prefer to be called "doctor" rather than "agent." These depictions, therefore, demonstrate that the abidinginnocence of these characters in no way precludes an intelligent mind.

Autism and Violence

The final theme advanced in popular culture's portrayal of autism is perhaps the most negative. Some of the characters selected for this discussion demonstrate a propensity for violence. In *Representing Autism,* Stuart Murray notes this disturbing trend: "Within mainstream media, there is an increasing creep in the association of autism with violence . . . with the various claims that Cho Seung-Hui, the Virginia Tech student who murdered his teachers and fellow classmates, had autism, but such stories are few" (156). Murray pays no further attention to this issue, yet it deserves more attention.

Most of the characters in this study are harmless and peaceful, but their dangerous potential is often hinted. Sheldon's demonstration of violence, for instance, is trying to emulate Darth Vader's telekinetic death grip ("The Electric Can Opener Fluctuation"), which of course is not successful. Sheldon's sinister side is enough to disquiet his friends, however. Leonard warns Penny that Sheldon is "one lab accident away from being a super-villain" ("The Panty Piñata Polarization"). Sheldon's friends are also typically non-violent, but they often contemplate violence against Sheldon as he becomes

more annoying. Howard probably breathes the most murderous threats against Sheldon and even builds a crossbow to kill Sheldon, but Howard does not use it ("The Monopolar Expedition"). Leonard admits he has planned graphic schemes for murdering Sheldon on their trip to the North Pole, including locking Sheldon outside and allowing him to freeze to death, but he instead chooses a non-violent option of "destroying" Sheldon by falsifying data on Cooper's research project ("The Electric Can Opener Fluctuation"). Dr. Brennan also is typically non-violent; she knows martial arts but only uses this skill in self-defense ("The Man in the S.U.V."). However, she disturbs Booth when she tells him, in casual conversation, that she has devised a foolproof plan for murder and challenges him to come up with his own. She furthermore refuses to tell him the specifics of her plan because she entertains the notion that she might one day use it, explaining, "There are so many variables in a person's life, it would be irrational to completely rule out the possibility of murdering someone" ("The Body and the Bounty"). These examples are troubling because they suggest that even a benign autistic person harbors violent potential because they inherently possess the mind of a dangerous person.

Some of the violence portrayed by autistic characters seems to be derived from documented autistic characteristics. Many violent scenes involving autistic characters regard the unpredictable, frightening tendency of autistic "meltdowns." *Parenthood* demonstrates this in Max Braverman; when events unfold in a way contrary to what he expects, Max screams, thrashes about, and throws objects in his room ("I Hear You, I See You"). *Adam*, as previously discussed, displays a distressing meltdown. He repeatedly screams, "Dumb Adam!" and throws heavy objects. Beth tells him later that she left the

scene because she was afraid that she would be hurt, but Adam replies that he would never hurt her. Of course, this is not to suggest that autism does not display problematic behaviors, but it is distressing that these portrayals suggest that autism is fundamentally characterized by negative thoughts and actions that are intentionally violent, and therefore, that autistic people are inherently dangerous.

Some autistic characters are very violent. For most of the series of *Boston Legal,* Jerry Espenson is an amicable character, but the implication is that he is pleasant only because he takes medication and therapy to curtail his autism, though the specifics of this medical "help" remain vague. Before he is diagnosed and prescribed his medication, Jerry assaults his employer with a cake knife ("The Cancer Man Can"). On *Law and Order: Criminal Intent,* Wally Stevens, an insurance adjuster with Asperger's Syndrome, murders several people in order to acquire enough money to win back his estranged wife ("Probability"). On *Alphas*, a non-verbal autistic young woman named Anna is the leader of a violent terrorist organization called Red Flag ("Rosetta").

Yet, perhaps the most shocking violence demonstrated by a character in this study is Zack Addy's decision to conspire with a cannibalistic serial killer that the Jeffersonian team calls Gormogon. In the season three finale "The Pain in the Heart," while Zack and Hodgins perform an experiment associated with this case, the ingredients explode and permanently damage Zack's hands. Synchronous to the explosion, crucial evidence from the case is stolen. This leads the team to believe that there is a mole in the Jeffersonian who is working for the cannibal, and Brennan eventually deduces that the mole is Zack. Booth and Brennan question him, and he confesses that he has secretly been working as

an apprentice to Gormogon. He explains that the explosion was meant to serve as a distraction, but when he realized it was going to be more powerful than he intended, he purposely took the brunt of it so that Hodgins would not be hurt. Booth and Brennan cannot believe that Zack would have such disregard for human life by working with someone who murders and eats his victims, but Zack maintains that he was doing the right thing, even saying if they understood the "irrefutable logic" of his master, they would be proud of him. Brennan tries to understand by devising a logical debate:

> Brennan: I've always been proud of you, Zack. I've never met anyone more rational and intelligent, but there's a fault in your logic.
>
> Zack: With all due respect, you aren't cognizant of his logic.
>
> Brennan: Assumption number one: secret societies exist.
>
> Zack: Accepted. Hodgins has been explaining this to me for years.
>
> Brennan: Assumption number two: the human experience is adversely affected by secret societies.
>
> Zack: Accepted.
>
> Brennan: Assumption number three: attacking and killing members of secret societies will have an ameliorating affect on the human experience.
>
> Zack: Accepted!
>
> Bones: All of your assumptions are built upon a first principle, Zack, to wit, the historical human experience as a whole is more important than a single person's life.
>
> Zack: Yes.

Bones: Yet you risked it all so you wouldn't hurt Hodgins.

Zack: (a tear goes down his face) There's . . . you are correct, there is an inconsistency in my reasoning.

Perhaps what this exchange demonstrates is that Zack can empathize somewhat with people that he knows, like his friend Jack Hodgins, but he has no compassion for strangers. Zack later has a psychological interview with Dr. Sweets that further demonstrates his difficulty with empathy. Zack tells Sweets that he feels regret over the Gormogon case, yet his regret is not associated with the people who died but with his failure to realize that the serial killer's logic was faulty. Sweets tells Zack in frustration, "You know, a *sane* person would regret murdering someone more than being taken in by a line of crap" ("The Perfect Pieces in the Purple Pond"). The comment, however, is lost on Zack because he is incapable of understanding the victims' perspectives.

Zack's violence is so unbelievable that it seems the makers of the show decided to tone it down for the audience's benefit. Zack shockingly confesses to stabbing a man in the heart for his "master," and the prosecuting attorney subsequently decides that this is a case of "a strong personality find[ing] a weak personality and tak[ing] advantage." Therefore, Zack is committed to a mental hospital ("The Pain in the Heart"). However, Zack, in a curious reprisal of his character in an unrelated season of *Bones*, tells Sweets in confidence that he never actually killed anyone; instead, he only told the cannibal where to find the victim. Yet Zack will not allow Sweets to convey the truth of the extent his involvement to the rest of the team because if Zack were to be found guilty of being a sane accessory to murder, he would be sent to prison ("The Perfect Pieces in the Purple

Pond"). Although it could be seen as an elevation of self-preservation over the truth in an autistic character's calculated plan to avoid severe punishment, this episode and this scene in particular seems to be more for the audience's benefit, to satisfy a perceived incongruence between this character's personality and his actions, but it is still unusual that Zack wants his friends to think him to be more dangerous than he really is. Therefore, while Zack could be considered to be an anomalous autistic character because he prefers to live a lie, he greatly advances the association of autism and deliberate violence.

Nevertheless, fictional television shows and films are not the only media responsible for promoting this trend of autism being synonymous with violence. Even informational shows focus on violence ostensibly connected with autism. For example, to date the talk show *Dr. Phil* has broadcast two episodes that discuss autism spectrum disorders in depth. The first episode, titled "Extreme Disorders," involves a teenager with Asperger's Syndrome, but the only aspect of his personality that is presented is his volatile, violent meltdowns. The young man's tantrums are so unpredictable and frightening that his father hides sharp objects and medications from his son so that he cannot access them, afraid of what might happen during a violent outburst. Dr. Phil McGraw acknowledges that there are other aspects associated with this form of autism, but he focuses on the extreme because he says, "This is the [aspect] that gets the attention because it's what makes all the noise." Dr. Phil even suggests that violence is an inherent aspect of the young man's nature, that violence is generally integral to Asperger's Syndrome. He tells the parents:

> I think it's really important that you understand the nature of this disease. If he was born with some kind of defect in his leg and he limped, you wouldn't criticize him for that. You wouldn't be upset with him for that. That would be totally involuntary, right? What if this is exactly the same thing? . . . . What if it's not a manipulation and exploitation on his part, but instead is neurologically based and totally involuntary on his part?

The second episode of *Dr. Phil* that focuses on autism features a number of sequences and accounts, both positive and negative (though more so the latter), concerning the challenges of parenting autistic children. Yet the opening segment of the episode, which receives the most focus, showcases an autistic boy who regularly makes death threats to his parents. Dr. Phil does not address the boy's violent language beyond the montages that he shows of the child; his focus is on the parents who each have developed their own coping mechanisms and live in denial. However, this installment is another demonstration in popular culture reinforcing the notion that autistic people are inherently violent.

Violence portrayed in characters with disabilities is nothing new in popular culture. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder cover this trend extensively in the fourth chapter of *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000). From Shakespeare's hunchbacked Richard III to physically distorted and disabled villains in horror films, violent people with disabilities are stereotypical, especially when they seek vengeance on their able-bodied counterparts (97-101). Mitchell and Snyder explain that film audiences are especially drawn to the abnormality of disability, and the correlation enhances narratives. Yet this leads to

problems, as these scholars express: "[T]he narrative convenience produces further effects: in the protected theater darkness audiences are given permission to stare at the socially 'inappropriate fact' of disability—a habit discouraged in other public settings!" (96). Though autism is largely an invisible disability, the above examples also offer the audience an opportunity to stare at an abnormal condition, and as members of the audience stare, they devisetheir own opinions and interpretations of what they are seeing. As a result, they may reach the wrong conclusion that violence is common or even universal in autistic people.

The promotion of this distressing mischaracterization of autism is not limited to popular culture. Murray notes, in the above quotation, a news citing that the Virginia Tech student who went on a shooting rampage was diagnosed with autism. Another extreme example of violence associated with the autism community occurred in Japan in the early 2000s. Yoshihiko Goto reports, "In 2000, a 17-year-old, academically well-performing high school student . . . killed a housewife and later explained his motive as 'wanting to experience the act of killing someone' . . . . The media reported and sensationalized the fact that the student was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome [*sic*] through psychiatric testing." This case brought autism spectrum disorders to Japan's heightened attention for all the wrong reasons. Says Goto:

> The media's inaccuracy concerning developmental disabilities became obvious and unnervingly misleading . . . . Amid the hype, the media also helped shape the general public's misconception of "developmental disabilities." People tended to see children with developmental disability

> labels as "dangerous" or having "antisocial" dispositions, and believing they could at any time commit crimes . . . . Anxious about the repercussions, the Autism Society of Japan was urged to issue *Autism Media Guide: To the Press* to request fairness and sensibility in the media. ("Critical Understanding . . .")

If such an advanced and well-educated nation as Japan is so easily convinced that extreme violence is a primary component of autism and that social deficits translate into social deviance, that an asocial demeanor is indicative of antisocial behavior, one can imagine the damage that such negative implications could have on the mainstream acceptance of autistic individuals into society. Parents could become afraid of their own children. Strangers would be even more uneasy around autistic people. More weight would be given to the argument to institutionalize autistic people in order to protect the public. This is certainly an unsubstantiated stereotype to associate with autism spectrum disorders because the majority of autistic people are not proven to be violent.

Other recent events in the news have created a similarly apprehensive reaction here in the United States of America. In mid-July 2012, James Holmes opened fire on patrons at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, killing twelve people and injuring several others. This sudden, tragic, random act of violence understandably has led many people to question Holmes's sanity as they attempt to understand why this tragedy happened. The following week, MSNBC commentator Joe Scarborough on his talk show *Morning Joe* posited a theory that Holmes was autistic. In his words:

> You have these . . . people that are somewhere, I believe, probably on the autism scale—I don't know if that's the case here, but it happens more often than not—people that can walk around in society, that can function on college campuses, can even excel in college campuses, but are socially disconnected. I have a son who has Asperger's who is loved by everyone in his family and who is wonderful, but it is for those that may not have a loving family and a support group and may be a bit further along on the autism spectrum, an extraordinarily frustrating, terrible challenge day in and day out. (Christopher "Autistic Journalist . . .")

Even though Scarborough backtracks in this quotationby suggesting that he is not certain that Holmes has an autism spectrum disorder, the phrase he used, "it happens more often than not" promotes and implies the belief that violence is a common component of autism.

Understandably, the autism community was greatly offended by Scarborough's comments. Mike Elk, who has Asperger's Syndrome and who is a staff writer for the newspaper *In These Times,* publically demanded that Scarborough retract the inflammatory statement, citing lack of evidence that James Holmes is autistic and the lack of any scientific evidence linking autism to violence. The Autism Self-Advocacy Network also issued a statement requesting a retraction. Ari Ne'eman, president of this organization, discussed on another talk show, *The Big Picture,* why Scarborough's comments needed to be addressed:

> You know, there are a lot of myths and stereotypes surrounding autism, including this idea that we're violent or that we lack empathy, and that has very real, practical consequences. It's important that we understand this isn't about political correctness; it's about recognizing that we as a community face discrimination in employment, in housing, are more likely to be segregated in school, to be institutionalized, and all of that has at its root a general sense of fear and prejudice in our society. Mr. Scarborough's remarks, quite frankly, only fed into that, and if we're going to take steps to try and address that discrimination, you know, we really have to respond to them.

Scarborough released a written statement the following day, though it was not quite a retraction and fell short of an apology. He explained that in this comment he was attempting to address an awareness of mental health in general, and autism was inadvertently mentioned as part of that observation. Said Scarborough, "Those suggesting that I was linking all violent behavior to Autism missed my larger point and overlooked the fact that I have a wonderful, loving son with Asperger's. Perhaps I could have made my points more eloquently" ("Morning Joe . . ."). The news later uncovered that Holmes is indeed mentally disturbed, possibly schizophrenic, and had been seeing a psychiatrist before the shooting, but nothing suggested that he is autistic. Despite this, evidence exists to suggest that Scarborough's less than "eloquent" comments negatively affected public perception. Karla Fisher, an autism self-advocate, posted on her Facebook status a conversation she had with her women's football team. When asked

about her work with autistic people, Fisher expressed that autistic people may have productive futures as doctors, lawyers, and successful parents. Someone within earshot interrupted Fisher and added to her list "mass murderers." Fisher posted, "I asked her if she was kidding. She was not. EVERYONE thought Holmes is autistic and that link was connected very clearly in that room" (Christopher, "Scarborough Tissue," emphasis Christopher's).

Violent behavior is a powerful stigma that media uses again and again to characterize people who are difficult to understand. The damage done to certain races and ethnic groups through stereotypic violent portrayals is common knowledge. For decades, Native Americans were considered to be merely savages and African Americans males were routinely stigmatized as criminals. René Girard, who is well known for his studies on violence, notes that people with disabilities are often victimized by these same stereotypes. As he says, "The further one is from normal social status of whatever kind, the greater the risk of persecution" (18). Following the example of the Autism Society of Japan and of other falsely maligned groups of people, autistic people should appeal to media's sense of fairness and sensibility to get out from under this inappropriate character defamation and inequitable oppression.

Yet one particular current event is causing agonizing upheaval and calling into question all three of these assumed characteristics. This tragic occurrence is the massacre of twenty-six children and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012, by Adam Lanza. "Raising Adam Lanza," a special report on the PBS news show *Frontline,* sought to delve into Lanza's life, though reporters of the

Hartford Courant received only one email from an undisclosed family member, stating that Lanza had been diagnosed with sensory integration disorder and Asperger's Syndrome. Technically, of course, this conclusion is hearsay because a doctor or a psychologist does not confirm it. However, friends and neighbors, as they describe their memories of Lanza, recall traits that are consistent with an autism diagnosis. Throughout the documentary, never publicly released pictures of Lanza's childhood are shown. *Frontline* even provides a video of a very young Lanza happily barking like a dog while on a camping trip. These images clearly present and demonstrate Lanza as a relatively ordinary, innocent child, albeit socially awkward. Nevertheless, there is nothing revealed in Lanza's childhood according to this report that would give any indication as to why Adam would grow up to commit such a terrible act as the Sandy Hook shooting. The observation is made that Lanza was facing a transition in his life before the massacre; he was considering going to college and moving away from home, but the *Hartford Courant* reporters also suggest that this prospect might have been a moment Adam welcomed. Lanza's mother certainly seemed to have no clue that Adam was about to execute such violence; she went to a restaurant to eat dinner and safely went to sleep in her own bed. Adam's inhuman intensions were indiscernible and hidden from the world. This report offers the profile of a young, presumably, autistic person and a disturbing dichotomy: innocence and evil. Yet, this report is unique for another reason. It goes out of its way to stress one very important detail:

Andrew Julien (*Hartford Courant* Editor): But there’s nothing that connects Asperger’s to the kind of violence we saw at Sandy Hook.

Josh Kovner (*Hartford Courant* Reporter): Absolutely nothing by itself. Absolutely nothing.

CHAPTER 7

Up a Steep Staircase: The Portrayal of Autistic Relationships

It is important for this study to pay particular attention to how the selected television shows and films portray relationships in which autistic characters are involved because social deficits are consistently recognized by researchers and by autistic people as autism's greatest detriment. Popular culture recognizes the struggles autistic people often face through the expression of trials autistic characters endure to form relationships with other characters in the cast. In most of the works discussed here, autistic characters are given neurotypical counterparts who function to keep autistic behavior in check, helping autistic characters understand the ways of the neurotypical world, and providing instruction when autistic characters display inappropriate behavior. However, in most of these relationships, the autistic character is arguably the dominant, stronger personality. Four types of relationships portrayed in the selected television shows and films are most prominent, and the following will investigate these relationship types through traits that are continually portrayed, will compare the associations to research of relationships in the neurotypical world, and then will discuss how popular culture views such relationships through visual metaphors.

The strongest, most affirming type of autistic-neurotypical relationship is, perhaps, an intimate friendship. Examples of such friendships include Abed Nadir and Troy Barnes in *Community,* as well as Sherlock Holmes and John Watson in *Sherlock.* These relationships do not easily dissolve and do not involve much conflict, but perhaps

the most successful aspect of a strong friendship relationship is that it is the type of relationship that best affirms and accepts autistic characteristics. The neurotypical friend-character often supports the autistic friend-character unquestioningly, seeks the autistic character's wisdom, and participates in activities with the autistic friend even if other neurotypical characters may consider the suggested activity to be outlandish or childish. The neurotypical friend does not seem to mind the autistic friend's peculiarities and often defends them to other neurotypicals. The inevitable clashes that occur on occasion in the autistic-neurotypical friendship, often attributable to the fact that the two friends' minds are not configured the same way, usually manifests in momentary strife, but the friendship usually reestablishes itself stronger than ever. One disadvantage to this type of relationship, however, is that the autistic character usually does not seem to have the same level of curiosity and/or concern for his neurotypical counterpart's interests and/or feelings, and therefore the friendship seems a bit one-sided. Perhaps the autistic character perceives that mutual scrutiny of theneurotypical friend is unwarranted and/or undesired. However, such unrequited emotional interest can lead to problems, especially in other types of relationships that will be discussed later.

Unfortunately, intense autistic-neurotypicalfriendships are, perhaps, not typical of friendships in the real world, especially in the vital function and purpose they play on television and in films. Psychologists note that most people seek friends to serve as confidants. When asked what qualities make for a good friend, "trust," "honesty," and "loyalty" top the neurotypical list. Yet, friendships with autistic characters seem to be based more on acceptance, which, according to Lillian Rubin's book *Just Friends: The*

Role of Relationships in Our Lives (1985), is a quality usually found at the bottom of the neurotypical list (7). Nevertheless, acceptance is a characteristicthat is highly prized in friends sought by autistic adults and adolescents in the real world. Tony Attwood, who is widely recognized as an expert on Asperger's Syndrome, says in his *Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome* (2007) that to an autistic individual thirteen years or older, "A friend is defined as someone who 'accepts me for who I am' or 'thinks the same way as me about things.' A friend provides a sense of personal identity and is compatible with one's own personality" (85).

In his book *Understanding Relationships* (1991), Steve Duck, a respected psychologist particularly in the field of relationships, reports that typical friendships are usually defined by expectations and rules. The expectations for a friend is to be "someone who is honest and open, shows affection, tells us his or her secrets and problems, gives us help when we need it, trusts us and is also trustworthy, shares times and activities with us, treats us with respect and obviously values us, and is prepared to work through disagreements" (7). While many of these characteristics hold true, some of them may not be friendship expectations that autistic people value, an observation often reflected in fictional autistic friendships. For example, not many depicted friendships including an autistic character involve secret telling, an activity that makes certain autistic characters rather anxious. The rules for typical friendships on Duck's list also include: "hold conversations, do not disclose confidence to other people, refrain from public criticism, [and] repay debts and favours" (7). Perhaps since neurotypical characters seem to understand that these rules are not always implicit to autistic

characters, they do not always hold their autistic counterparts to such standards. Neurotypical characters may go out of their way to explain such rules and to stress why they are important to a friendship, but they understand if their autistic friend has difficulty accepting or maintaining these rules. On the other hand, such rules for friendship are not universal. Some neurotypical people possess ideas of friendship that better prepare them for a relationship with an autistic individual. Duck states that one of his own acquaintances provided an unofficial definition of a friend as a person who stops his comrade from doing something inappropriate when that person's mental faculties have been compromised (6). Perhaps such a duty should be an expected rule of friendship, an implied social convention.

The strongest autistic-neurotypical relationship portrayed by popular culture in this entire study is, arguably, the friendship between Abed Nadir and Troy Barnes in the television show *Community.* Their friendship displays many of the characteristics mentioned here. These two young men devise several games that their peers find ridiculous, such as hosting faux talk shows, building blanket forts, and reenacting scenes from television and movies in an empty room. Troy never questions Abed about why they play such games, and he participates with full gusto. When the rest of the neurotypical characters on *Community* question if Abed's behavior is getting out of control, Troy defends him, as seen in this scene from the episode "Contemporary Impressionists":

> Shame on you people. It's not our job to help Abed grow up. Abed doesn't need reality. Abed is a magical, elf-like man who makes us all

> more magical by being near us . . . . All we had was dumb reality before we met that man, and he's made all our lives better than reality. Now it becomes a little inconvenient, and it's time to get real? For shame!

Probably because of this opinion, Troy corrects Abed's behavior only rarely. One example is the moment that Troy teaches Abed about friendship and honesty, as discussed in the previous chapter. Another comes at the end of this same episode when Troy realizes that some of Abed's behavior is getting him into serious financial trouble, and they have the following conversation:

> Troy: I lied because you don't like people who tell you what to do, and I don't want to be one of those people.
>
> Abed: Then don't be.
>
> Troy: I have to be! . . . . I had to work really hard to help you!
>
> Abed: But that's what you wanted to do.
>
> Troy: Yes!
>
> Abed: But I can't do what I want to do?
>
> Troy: I guess not, not all the time! Sometimes you're just going to have to trust that I know better about stuff.
>
> Abed: I don't know if I can do that.
>
> Troy: Then I guess you'll have to trust that you're going to have to trust me.
>
> Abed: Well, I don't want to stop being your friend, so . . . I guess I'll let you tell me what to do sometimes. Still best friends?

Troy: Yeah! Still best friends, always.

Abed: Cool. Cool, cool, cool.

This conversation demonstrates that Abed and Troy realize that they do have different expectations of friendship. Though their friendship is based on acceptance, Troy believes that Abed needs to put more emphasis on trust, and Abed is not sure if he can. Their friendship is tested later in season three in the two-part episodes "Digital Exploration of Interior Design" and "Pillows and Blankets." What some may consider an inconsequential detail, whether or not to build a pillow fort or a blanket fort on Greendale's campus, is an important issue to Abed, and it becomes the basis of a major fight between the two friends, which the show depicts in the style of a Civil War documentary. During this dispute, both exploit their opponent's greatest weaknesses, but Abed shares Troy's flaws with others on "his side," which constitutes a breach in the trust that Troy highly values. Nevertheless, their friendship pulls through in the end. They continue their pillow fight, even when everyone else loses interest, because they say it is their final act, until Jeff makes them realize that the only reason the fight has continued is because they "like each other so much." Their friendship philosophies may differ, but Troy and Abed understand their friendship as necessary.

The second kind of autistic-neurotypical relationship is the business relationship. This relationship type is the most commonly observed in the popular culture offerings explored in this study. Multiple business relationships between neurotypical and autistic characters appear on *Bones, Boston Legal, Criminal Minds, House, Law and Order: Criminal Intent,* and *Monk.* Some of these business relationships are intimate, either

doubling as intensely close friendships, like Jerry Espenson and Alan Shore, or as romantic relationships, like Temperance Brennan and Seeley Booth or Dr. House and Dr. Cuddy, but others have little to no personal component, i.e., the characters involved simply work together, like Robert Goren and Alexandra Eames. Even if there is very little personal involvement, a working relationship can produce strong bonds. In the business relationship, the neurotypical character usually recognizes the autistic character's strengths and does everything possible to support those strengths so that the autistic character can perform the job to the best of his ability. That could be why characters such as Sharona and Natalie endure the often thankless job as Adrian Monk's assistant because they realize how valuable he is to the San Francisco police when his distractions are limited and want to help him solve the case. In this respect, the working relationship provides a mutual benefit. Each character has a vested interest in seeing that the work is done and done well. Unlike the friendship-type relationship, a type of mutual curiosity and respect also characterize the business relationship. Autistic characters seek advice from their neurotypical business partners, and neurotypical characters seek to understand autistic coworkers better. For instance, in *Bones* Brennan often approaches Angela for advice, particularly about socializing with Booth, but there have been incidents that Angela has sought Brennan's counsel as well, which Brennan usually provides from her knowledge of anthropology. Neurotypical characters who are elevated in the business hierarchy often adopt a role of mentor toward their autistic employee, encouraging the autistic character, instead of being the antagonists that authority figures tend to portray. Jason Gideon and Spencer Reid in *Criminal Minds* have a much intimate

relationship than employer-employee, perhaps closer to a father-son relationship. Gideon gives Reid advice and encouragement, but they also often play chess together. When Gideon chooses to leave the FBI, Reid is the only member of the team to whom he explains why ("In Name and Blood"). When romantic relationships between neurotypical and autistic characters develop from business relationships, they appear to be more successful than other such romantic relationships. Dr. Brennan's relationship as Booth's paramour is rather solid, so far, and though the audience only sees the beginning of Jerry's romance with Katie, it also seems to be rather strong. In both examples, this stability seems to exist because the neurotypical character has spent a good deal of time with the autistic character and has become accustomed to their eccentricities, perhaps even seeing such qualities as endearing.

Surprisingly, psychologists do not seem to research business relationships, neurotypical or autistic, as much as they do other types of relationships. One psychologist refers to business relationships as "exchange relationships" because they typically do not have the level of intimacy that friends, family members, or romantic partners enjoy (Weiten and Lloyd 226). Another psychologist explains that co-workers only act friendly toward each other because it is better than not being friendly and not because they truly want to be friends (Reisman 207). Perhaps in some ways popular culture seeks to portray business relationships that are deeper in intimacy. In many television shows like *Boston Legal,* neurotypicals in business relationships are routinely portrayed as being involved in more intimate, usually romantic, relationships. Of course, such relationships are possible in a work environment, though they are often ill advised.

Duck briefly discusses workplace romance relationships and how problematic they can be (88-89).

However, one study on work relationships may explain why neurotypical characters support autistic characters' strengths so well. In "Relationships at Work: A Matter of Tension and Tolerance" (1981), I. L. Mangam explains, "Relationships at work are marked by a continuous process of negotiation, one in which working agreements are created, consolidated, or overturned" (200). Neurotypical characters support autistic characters because it is part of the negotiation process. Each worker has his or her place, and each worker must support each other in order to keep the business running. Autistic characters tend to be satisfied with their situation and do not seek advancement. If they do seek promotion, they usually lack the expected ability to "schmooze" and must rely on their neurotypical counterparts to teach them such skills.

The third type of relationship prevalent in these popular culture films and television shows is the romantic relationship. Examples of this type of relationship involving a neurotypical character and an autistic character can be found in Adam Raki and Beth Buckwald in *Adam,* Rizvan Khan and Mandira in *My Name is Khan,* and Leonard Hoffstadter and Penny in *The Big Bang Theory.* What attracts the two people into this type of autistic-neurotypical romance is not always clear, but it does not seem to rely on typical reasons. Physical attraction is often not the center of attraction in autistic-neurotypical romance. Often a neurotypical character who is involved in this kind of relationship seems to be more attracted to the autistic character's honesty and innocence, which seems to be why Mandira pursues a relationship with Khan and why Beth pursues

a relationship with Adam. However, the rationale behind the attraction of the autistic character is even vaguer. More than likely, much like friendships, romantic relationships are kindled primarily by acceptance, but proximity and familiarity also seem to play a major role. Leonard seems to pursue Penny not just because she is physically attractive but also because she likes him as a friend, despite his peculiarities, and because she lives across the hall. Neurotypicals in these romantic relationships often demonstrate acceptance by modifying their behavior to please the autistic character. For example, Beth explains to Adam what she means when she speaks metaphorically. Likewise, the autistic partner may modify his behavior to seem more neurotypical though he may not, necessarily, intend this amendment as a display of affection. Such as when Rizvan seeks Mandira's attention by attempting to mimic her: Mandira gives a homeless man an apple; Rizvan gives the same homeless man a pumpkin. However, this kind of autistic-neurotypical is often very one-sided because the autistic character seems to realize instinctivelythat the neurotypical character has more knowledge of romantic conventions and thus allows the neurotypical character, for the most part, to drive the relationship. Therefore, in a type of relationship that is usually based on give and take, autistic characters mostly give. Leonard sets the bar rather high in his gifts for Penny, such as giving her a permanently preserved snowflake from the North Pole ("The Electric Can Opener Fluctuation") and an all-expense paid trip to Switzerland ("The Large Hadron Collision"), but he seeks nothing in return besides her willingness to continue in the relationship. Even when the relationship ends, he overlooks her debts for money he has loaned to her for various reasons ("The Cruciferous Vegetable Amplification"). Also,

based on the examples in this study, autistic-neurotypical romantic relationships that do not start as business relationships tend to fail. What seems to come between the people in these romantic relationships is a lack of empathy, perhaps from both parties, and miscommunication. So it seems that popular culture supports the argument that romantic relationships for two people with completely different modes of perception are doomed from the outset.

Evidence in psychology supports this premise. Attwood says in real life that the neurotypical partner sees in the autistic partner a person who is "kind, attentive, and slightly immature: the highly desirable 'handsome and silent stranger'" (304). The autistic person in the relationship, however, just desires someone who will help him or her function in the neurotypical world with "advanced social and maternal abilities" (305). Attwood also recognizes that a romantic relationship with an autistic person is atypical particularly because of the autistic person's difficulty in communicating emotion and in navigating a different level of affection. In Attwood's words, "[I]t is love, but not as we know it" (307-08). So it does seem that autistic people "play the game of love" with a different set of rules than neurotypicals, and that could explain why autistic-neurotypical romantic relationships often fail.

Adam provides a good example of how autistic characters show their love in ways many neurotypical people may find unusual. Adam Raki displays his affection to Beth Buckwald by inviting her to share in his interests, such as showing her his personal planetarium and revealing a well-hidden family of raccoons in Central Park. However, this is not the expression of love that Beth desires. She tells her mother on the phone,

“We’ll never have a moment where we look into each other’s eyes and know exactly what the other person is thinking. The idea of that wouldn’t even make sense to him.He’s never told me that he loves me. I don’t know what it would mean to him if he did.” Yet, she does not know that Adam is eavesdropping, and right after she hangs up, he comes closer to her and says, “I love you, Beth.” In Adam’s mind, he has demonstrated his love throughout the relationship, andthough he tries to express it in a neurotypical way, it is not enough.

Adam also comments on the dependent nature of autistic characters. Beth has a conversation regarding Raki with her father, Marty (Peter Gallagher):

> Marty: One more thing, about Adam . . . he’s not for you. It’s not his fault, but he’s—he’s more like your child than anything else. He’ll never be the kind of man that you can admire, that you can look up to, and it’s not fair that he should hope for something that’s—that’s . . . that’s . . . impossible.
>
> Beth: People with Asperger’s get married. They have families.
>
> Marty: Married?! He lives in another world! You don’t need to make that kind of compromise, Beth!

Beth tries to continue in the relationship against her father’s wishes, but she realizes that much of what he says is true. When she asks Adam why he wants her to come with him to California, he clearly struggles to communicate his feelings and answers, “You, uh, you are a . . . like a part of me, and um, I need you to . . . to . . . help find a place to live and to learn how to get to work and to understand what it means when people say crazy

stuff and . . . I couldn't go without you." As Attwood says, Adam is only interested in someone who can help him navigate the neurotypical world, but Beth does not desire such a maternal function. This is not the partnership neurotypical romance typifies, so she ends it.

Even autistic romantic relationships in popular culture that appear to be more successful than this relationship in Adam have the potential to dissolve quickly. For instance, in My Name is Khan, Rizvan and Mandira were happily married for years, but their marriage nearly ends partially because they do not understand each other's different grieving process in reaction to the death of their son. Mandira is hysterical, weeping and calling out her son's name, but Khan is ready to "move on," advising Mandira to make dinner, explaining, "Doctors say that post-traumatic stress disorder causes people to ignore their health. You need to take care of your health." She responds by raving at him, even blaming him for their son's death, but Khan responds, "I don't understand what you're saying. You are not well." Clearly Khan and Mandira cannot empathize with each other in this difficult time, and the rift causes almost insurmountable communication problems.

The final type of relationship highlighted in these popular culture examples is the parent-child relationship. Examples of this can be found in *Ocean Heaven, Parenthood,* and *Temple Grandin*. Unfortunately, this type of relationship is also portrayed as weak and perhaps is the least affirming of autism. The parent is usually the neurotypical counterpart. However, *My Name is Khan* is a notable exception becauseit includesan autistic character in a parental role, though the audience observes Khan's parenting very

littlebecause his son dies. Portrayals of autism in the parent-child relationship in popular culture usually focus on the neurotypical character's frustrations and distress over raising an autistic child and the parent's pervasive desire to make the child "normal." Thus it appears that there is a low level of parental acceptance of an autistic child. Most parents portrayed as accepting their autistic children completely, such as Wang in *Ocean Heaven* and Khan's mother in *My Name is Khan*, die, which suggests that such a parent is too ideal. Few parents in popular culture ever do the work required to fullyaccept their autistic child, such as Eustacia Grandin. One exception to this is the father depicted on *Touch*, Martin Bohm (Kieffer Sutherland), whose acceptance of his nonverbal, supposedly autistic son Jake (David Misoux) is very high. However, his parental control of the boy is very low; Jake very rarely obeys him. Bohm is more permissive of his son's behavior because of Jake's supernatural ability to see connections in the world.

In some ways, a portrayal of low parental acceptance of autistic children is understandable. We, as a culture, are certainly not at the point where a parent would celebrate his or her child's being diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. It is typical for a parent to experience grief at the diagnosis of a disabled child. To dwell in that grief and to project it as a burden ever associated with that child may not be fair, but it is still, sadly, the reality many autistic children face. One study recognized that disabled children often face parental rejection and that "autism is also an area in the clinical literature where historically rejection has figured prominently" (Rohner 70).

Perhaps the greatest example of low parental acceptance of autistic children from the popular culture selections of this study comes from the show *Parenthood.* Adam and

Kristina Braverman are both frustrated with their son Max's autism so much that they focus entirely on activities with neurotypical characters rather than spending time with Max. An episode in season one titled "The Situation" demonstrates this. In this episode, Max has joined the local little league team. Adam and his nephew Drew both try to teach Max how to catch, but Adam becomes discouraged by Max's lack of athletic ability and eventually just practices with Drew. On the weekend, Adam agrees to play catch with Drew, but Max has a meltdown because Adam reneged on a previous promise he made with Max by doing so. Adam then gives into Max, but he is still upset that he missed the practice. Adam later explains to Drew's mother, "I would have loved to have gone to the ballpark this afternoon! It was because of your son that I got to go to the ballpark in the first place, and these last few days have been great, playing ball with those boys. It was almost like Max didn't have a situation, and that's what was so hard about this afternoon." Adam Braverman caters to his son's desires, but he clearly prefers the company offellow neurotypicals. Kristina feels the same way about her autistic son, even referring to being with Max as living in "a really bad prison" ("Don't Sleep with Your Autistic Nephew's Therapist").

Adam Braverman, in particular, seems to see no positive aspects to autism or to Max, even when those positive aspects are pointed out to him. As Adam and Kristina prepare to discuss Max's diagnosis with him in the episode "Qualities and Difficulties," Adam shows his dissatisfaction with autism:

> Kristina: "Qualities and difficulties of those with Asperger's. Quality: determined." That's a positive thing. "Difficulty: making friends. Quality: humorous in a unique way."
>
> Adam: Meaning no one gets his jokes.
>
> Kristina: "Quality: exceptional at remembering things that others can't."
>
> Adam: Things that other people don't care about. Bugs! The lifespan of a particular insect, or the wingspan of a flying cockroach, who cares? That's what that means.
>
> Kristina: I care. "Difficulty: reading other people's cues." I think this is a good start. This is helpful.
>
> Adam: (talking over her) Well, I don't! I think it's a bunch of positive language; that's all it is. It's a lie.

By refusing to accept the more positive aspects of autism and seeing them only as tedious aspects of Max's social personality, Adam views Max as a substandard son. Adam and Kristina also seem to doubt Max's maturity and lack trust in their son. When they decide to mainstream Max in a public school, they do so without seeking any input from Max ("Taking the Leap").

On the other hand, *Parenthood*, partly due to the way it is filmed,seems to convey the message that parenting any child is stressful. Writer and executive producer Jason Katims explains in a DVD feature:

> My idea that I started with was your children are never who you expect them to be, that they're constantly surprising you. And in a way, that's

> wonderful, in a way it challenges you. And that was sort of an idea I wanted to . . . have for everybody in the family . . . I also . . . really pushed for this naturalistic feeling. I do think, like, the small, true moments that happen between actors in a scene, you know, I really wanted to . . . bring that to *Parenthood.* You know, I trust them. It's not about having to say every word as written. I want them to take ownership. ("Get to Know Your Parents")

Yet the way this "naturalistic" interpretation often manifests is that everyone talks over each other. For example, if Max's family is together for a meal, Max may be loudly voicing his concerns and his older sister Haddie may also be arguing about a random topic, while Adam and Kristina address both situations simultaneously. The result is a cacophonous confusion that is very difficult for the audience to follow. Such scenes imply that parenting in general is chaotic, that not only parenting an autistic child is stressful.

A couple of other types of relationships bear mention. First, there are failed relationships. Television shows in particular seem to portray the social struggles that autistic characters face when a friendship or a romantic relationship fails to flourish. In these failed relationships, the autistic character may strive to learn and to employ certain rules of social interaction and may believe, initially, that those efforts were successful only to learn the sad truth that hisor her advance has been rejected. In other instances, a neurotypical character tries to engage an autistic character and fails because the autistic person has no interest or understanding of such social connection. Either way, failed

relationships demonstrate how difficult that meaningful social associations are for autistics in the real world.

A good example of the former type of failed relationship is seen in the *Monk* episode "Mr. Monk Makes a Friend." In this episode, a man named Hal Tucker (Andy Ricter) approaches Monk appearing to seek a friendship with him. He seems impressed with Monk's many eccentricities, invites him to sporting events, and spends time with Monk at his house. The rest of the characters are suspicious of Tucker's behavior, as though it would be unlikely that anyone would genuinely want to be friends with Monk, but Monk is ecstatic and believes that the more time he can spend with Hal the closer their relationship will be. Monk becomes depressed and confused when Hal suddenly ends their relationship just shortly after Monk had asked if they could be considered best friends. At the end of the episode, Tucker reveals that his show of friendship was all a ruse. He even tells Monk, "Spending a day with you is like pulling teeth! I'm surprised your own shadow keeps you company!" The rest of the characters try to get Monk to understand that they truly are his friends, but he does not seem to see them in that way.

Another type of failed relationship can be seen on the *Sherlock* episode "A Scandal in Belgravia." This is a modernized retelling of the original Conan Doyle story "A Scandal in Bohemia" in which Holmes is bested by Irene Adler. In the television version, Adler (Lara Pulver) repeatedly attempts to seduce Holmes, but he does not understand her cues:

> Irene: Have you ever had anyone? And when I say "had," I'm being indelicate.

> Sherlock: I don't understand.
>
> Irene: I'll be delicate, then. (takes his hand) Let's have dinner. You might be hungry.
>
> Sherlock: I'm not.
>
> Irene: Good.
>
> Sherlock: (strokes her hand) Why would I . . . want to have dinner . . . if I wasn't hungry?
>
> Irene: Mr. Holmes, if it was the end of the world, if this was the very last night . . . would you have dinner with me? (Mrs. Hudson calls for Sherlock, Irene whispers) Too late.
>
> Sherlock: It's not the end of the world; it's Mrs. Hudson.

Despite his remarkable intellect, Sherlock cannot deduce Irene's amorous allusions. In fact, he does not detect her intended seduction until he reads her biological signs, such an elevated pulse and dilated pupils.

Another relationship depicted in media and worthy of note is a social association between two autistic people. In most "special episodes" in which an autistic character notices something similar about a guest character and they connect, the idiosyncrasy exhibited by the guest star is portrayed as a behavior uncharacteristic of the regular character. Neurotypical characters may recognize the odd behavior as an autistic similarity and encourage the new relationship. For instance, in a *House, M.D.* episode entitled "Lines in the Sand," a boy with nonverbal autism is sent to the hospital because he is screaming literally for his life. House seems to be the only doctor who is convinced

that something beyond the boy's autism is wrong, and he reacts to this patient in a way that is uncharacteristic of his character. In a conversation regarding the patient, House makes these observations:

> Skinny, socially privileged, white people get to draw this neat little circle. Everyone inside the circle is normal. Everyone outside the circle should be beaten, broken, and reset, so that they could be brought inside the circle. Failing that, they should be institutionalized, or worse–pitied . . . . Why would you feel sorry for someone who gets to opt out from the inane courteous formalities which are utterly meaningless, insincere, and therefore degrading? Can you imagine how liberating it would be to live a life free of all the mind-numbing social niceties? . . . . I don't pity this kid; I envy him.

On the other hand, when two autistic people are in an ongoing relationship, it usually becomes more difficult over time. Each autistic individual has and prefers his or her own specific interests and idiosyncrasies, and though the two autistic people might consider themselves to be friends, they also tend to become annoyed with each other because their fascinations are not the same and neither is willing to accommodate the other. This phenomenon is clearly seen in *Mozart and the Whale*, particularly in Donald Morgan's autism support group. Every member of the group is completely different. It is obvious, watching their interactions, that the members of this large group merely tolerate each other and that they sometimes purposefully irritate their eccentricities. For instance, as one young woman reassures herself that her parents will pick her up at the

bulletin board, another woman screams, “THERE’S NO BULLETIN BOARD AT THE PARK; YOU’RE SCREWED! THEY’LL NEVER FIND YOU, EVER!” Donald is determined to keep the group together because he is afraid of being alone in a world of people who do not understand him. The group sees him as someone who is superior because he is more high functioning than the rest of the group, and they support him, especially when his relationship with Isabel Sorensen is going through rough times. Yet there still seems to be, as Donald describes it, “discord” in the group, and the participants do not really understand how to support each other. When one member discovers that her mother has cancer, another member yells at her, “CAN I GO TO THE FUNERAL?” and another responds, “I’m not going, and that’s for sure.”

These relationships maynot be as rich in symbolism as other characteristics discussed in this study, but there are some visual metaphors used in popular culture to mirror and emphasize the difficulty of social relationships for autistic people. A particularly thought-provoking example is used throughout the series of *The Big Bang Theory*. Sheldon and Leonard’s apartment is on the apartment building’s fourth floor, but the elevator in that building is broken. Therefore, in order to get to their apartment, where most of the action and interaction of the show occurs, the characters are required to climb stairs. The show uses that time for exposition; characters usually think aloud and/or discuss with each other how they feel about situations in the episode. The blocking associated with this stairwell is an odd choice for a television show to use as a storytelling device, especially because in discussions where characters are on the stairs, they often are awkwardly contorted to face each other and routinely arefacing away from

the camera and the audience. In fact, sometimes when the punch line of the stairwell conversation is delivered, the characters climbing the stairs are completely off-camera. Therefore, it is clear that there is something significant about these stairs.

The stairs on *The Big Bang Theory* affect everyone on the show. Penny, who is neurotypical, must climb the stairs to get to her apartment as well; the elevator is out-of-order for her too. The audience learns on the episode "The Staircase Implementation" that the four "nerdy" men of the cast are responsible for the elevator being useless. Thus their very presence has created an inconvenience for everyone. From this evidence, it could be argued that the stairs represent the communication and social interaction difficulties inherent with autism. Since autistic people have a different kind of mental process and perception, communication is not always as direct. One needs to understand that there is a different logic and/or vocabulary to navigate. It may take longer and be harder to reach the place where each other lives, the place of understanding, but it is not impossible. Sharing social space with autism requires using an alternative mode; there is no other choice.

Another metaphor used to illustrate social difficulties associated with autism occurs in *Temple Grandin.* Temple uses the metaphor of a door to understand transitioning into new stages of her life, but the camera indicates something else. When Temple goes through a door to confront someone, the camera zooms in on the door, and the perception becomes distorted. This depicts how difficult it is for Temple to transition. These doors are not opened easily; it is not until she decides to share her story about living with autism that doors seem to open for her on their own accord. Though this

metaphor aids Grandin in crossing these crucial thresholds of her life, it does not reduce the effort she must exert to overcome the barrier of her social anxiety.

It is also the case that the autistic community uses similar metaphors. In a public service announcement from the Autism Self-Advocacy Network, a group of autistic people stands in front of massive doors that slam shut. Ari Ne'eman, who narrates the piece, explains that "a national conversation about autism is happening without us. This has to change." As the group discusses how their lives have been influenced by their autistic experiences, the doors open again, and the group passes through the open doors at the end of the public service announcement. These doors symbolize inclusion into society. Autism did not shut these doors; cultural prejudice did. Autism cannot open them either; only acceptance will.

Another public service announcement from the Internet group Rethinking Autism portrays a metaphor with a similar message. A support group for parents of autistic children gathers to air their grievances. With every complaint, one woman provides an answer, challenging the parents to consider their child's point of view and to reconsider their position on autism. One might assume that this woman is the counselor or the leader of the group, but after she speaks, no one responds. They finally admit that they do not hear her. In the next shot, the woman is sitting in the same room, in the same semi-circle, but all the other chairs are empty, and she narrates, "I've spent most of my life feeling like no one is listening. My name is Tammy, and I'm autistic." An empty room is another way of illustrating the isolation that autistic people often experience. In a

society with a desperate need to connect and share experiences, autistic people are often painfully alone.

Another powerful, visual metaphor for relationships often discussed in film studies is the point of view the camera creates. Laura Mulvey is recognized in feminist film theory as analyzing this perception in her theory of the male gaze in cinema, which she sets forth in her essay "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Her main argument is that female characters in film have really one main purpose: to fulfill the sexual desires of male characters through their voyeuristic or fetishistic pleasures. Mulvey argues that what the camera displays is the desiring gaze usually of the leading male character that eroticizes female characters for him and for the audience. Therefore, Mulvey argues, with the use of the camera, "The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action" (64).

Disability studies also discusses how the public perceives disabled characters through the way that the camera presents them. However, instead of arguing that the camera represents the male protagonist, theorists in Disability Studies say that the camera represents the able-bodied protagonist, in the case of this study the neurotypical character. This quotation from the opening of Martin Norden's book *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (1994) considers the same details of Mulvey's theory:

> [M]ost movies have tended to isolate disabled characters from their able-bodied peers as well as from each other. This phenomenon . . . is reflected

> not only in the typical storylines of the films but also to a large extent in the ways that filmmakers have visualized the characters interacting in their environments; they have often used the basic tools of the trade—framing, editing, sound, lighting, set-design elements . . . to suggest a physical or symbolic separation of disabled characters from the rest of society. (1)

To illustrate further this idea of isolation, theorists in Disability Studies investigate a look with a different purpose than the gaze, the stare. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson addresses this response closely in her essay "The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography" (2002). She discusses this trait as the tendency for non-disabled people to focus on obvious abnormalities but rarely to broaden the prospective to include the whole body, even when the disability has no obvious physical manifestation. In some ways, Thomson acknowledges that this action isolates disabled people but may also give them power, explaining, "Staring thus creates disability as a state of absolute difference rather than simply one more variation of the human form. At the same time, staring constitutes disability identity by manifesting the power relations between the subject positions of disabled and able-bodies" (57). As Thomson reminds us, staring is far more intense than gazing, for "staring registers the perceptions of difference and gives meaning to impairment by marking it as aberrant" (56). The stare in film works in the same way as Thomson argues that photography gives the audience permission to stare at disabled people by "exaggerating and fixing the conventions of display and eliminating the possibility for interaction or spontaneity between viewer and viewed" (58).

This could be an argument for why autistic characters are given so much attention. Neurotypical characters notice the autistic characters' unusual behavior and stare, and the audience stares with them. The stare not only isolates the autistic individual and classifies his or her behavior as aberrant; it also makes the autistic person a subject of pity. This is not only achieved in the way the camera creates the stare but is also accomplished in music, framing, and other techniques that Norden lists above. For example, in the movie *Adam*, the camera often shoots Adam Raki from the doorway of his kitchen while the soft, wistful theme music plays. This shot portrays the autistic man in a world by himself, very isolated and alone. It causes the audience to have pity on him and to desire him to find someone like Beth so he will not be alone. It does not suggest that Adam is satisfied in such a state.

Another example of the camera "staring" at an autistic character is seen in *Boston Legal,* a television show that is characterized by its unconventional camera tactics. On the second season episode "Legal Deficits," Jerry Espenson first appearance, William Shatner's character warns Alan Shore not to call Jerry "Hands." Alan asks, "Why would I? Why do you?" In the next scene, the audience sees Espenson pacing as he talks to Alan, but we do not see Espenson's face. Instead, the camera focuses on his hands, peculiarly placed, flat on his thighs. The audience does not see Espenson's face until after his first line. Therefore, the audience gets the idea that Alan is staring at Espenson's eccentricity. Even as the series develops Espenson as a character, the camera tends to focusrecurringly on Espenson's hands when they are against his thighs, or on his feet when he is hopping. One previous episode recap segment that focused on Jerry is almost

entirely composed of his hopping and other stims ("The Good Lawyer"). Though the content show defines Jerry as a well-rounded human being, the camera defines him by his stims as a curiosity and an oddity and regularly, unabashedly, stares at his aberrant behavior.

However, the camera does not only highlight the neurotypical stare. There is a growing tendency for these works to create and attempt to present an autistic gaze that enables the audience to perceive how an autistic person sees the world. In the introduction to his essay collection *Autism and Representation* (2007), Mark Osteen notes that such a gaze is created in the movie *Mozart and the Whale*. The way Osteen describes this gaze is much like a description of a neurotypical stare:

> The filmmakers . . . comment on them [the autistic characters] cinematically: throughout the group scene—filmed on steps leading to a pond—director Peter Naess consistently places his camera well above or below the speaking character, and positions the speaker somewhere left or right of center frame. These unbalanced compositions and extreme angles illustrate a neurotypical viewpoint: autistic people are either greater or less than the rest of us, and live at the margins of human life. The scene's ultimate effect is that of a zoo exhibit, or what Isabelle [Sorenson] calls a "fish tank." (32)

However, another interpretation is possible. Almost the entire cast of characters in this film is autistic. Therefore, in creating a gaze that is off-center in the way Osteen describes, Naess might be attempting to emulate the autistic characters' poor eye contact. The camera shows enough to give the autistic speaker its attention, but it does not look

straight at the speaker, as though it is unable. In this way, the audience gains a new perception of how the autistic characters view the world and each other. Some other films and television shows use this same kind of gaze, showing how an autistic character sees the world. The *House* episode that features an autistic character, "Lines in the Sand," often shows a distorted world where everything glows brightly and sounds are very distant, demonstrating the autistic character's different way of processing sensory information. Some mystery detective shows, such as *Monk* or *Sherlock*, may suddenly draw full attention to some apparently inane detail, which could be interpreted as a preoccupation of the autistic character with objects over people, but usually such details become vital clues to the mysteries that the detectives are trying to solve. *Sherlock* focuses on such details usually during his deductions, such as in the way he explains how ink stains on a woman's blouse indicate that she is a newspaper reporter ("The Reichenbach Hero"), but *Monk* focuses on these details before he explains them. For instance, once when Monk has a conversation with someone, the camera suddenly breaks eye contact and centers on a soft drink can as the other man snapsthe tab off and drops it into the empty can. This seems like a mindless detail until Monk finds at the crime scene an empty soda can with a tab inside, the same brand of soda preferred by the man to whom Monk was previously speaking ("Mr. Monk and the Game Show").

Yet not only do the programs in this study emulate the way autistic people view the world, but perhaps more importantly, they also provide an idea of how autistic people think. Several films and television shows, including *Temple Grandin, Alphas, Community, Criminal Minds, House, Monk,* and *Sherlock,* try to provide perspectives of

what is going on in an autistic person's mind. This answers several questions about autistic behavior, such as why autistic people stim, how they understand language literally, why they talk to themselves, how they figure out problems that most neurotypical people might consider impossible, and, most of all, how vivid their imaginations can be. Of course, the reasoning is not always the same for all autistic people, but it gives the neurotypical audience another perspective of autism that is free of pity and isolation and actually empowers the autistic vision.

In order for depictions of relationships between neurotypical and autistic characters to improve, there may need to be incorporatedin a gaze that operates between these two types of gaze, one where neurotypical characters strive to see the world from an autistic character's perspective. In this study, there is really only one instance where that kind of gaze occurs. In the film *Ocean Heaven*, after Dafu is sent away to a community for mentally challenged patients, his father Wang goes to Dafu's room, hides behind a partition (Dafu's favorite spot for hide-and-seek), and looks into the other room. The audience sees his perspective and realizes that this is Dafu's perspective as well. Wang also picks up a wind-up toy and starts it up, and then he experiences one of Dafu's memories standing with the same toy at the beach. This moment may inspire pity, but it also inspires empathy because the audience knows in that moment Wang is seeing the world as Dafu sees it. More scenes like this may help neurotypical people, not just the characters but also the audience, understand autistic people more deeply and realize that neurotypicals climb the staircase along with them.

CHAPTER 8

"Autistic People Should . . .": A Polemical Conclusion

I know most of my autistic acquaintances solely through the Internet, particularly through a very popular social media website. Recently, some of these acquaintances made a rather distressing discovery. One of them typed into this same social media website's search bar the phrase "autistic people should," and the website's auto-complete feature suggested how to end that phrase based on posts found elsewhere on the website. What my friend saw shocked her so much, she immediately "photograbbed" it, blogged about it, and complained about it to the website's staff. The website finished her phrase with one word, "die."

Another autism self-advocate I know online entered the same phrase, "autistic people should," into a popular search engine. The first results he received were just as stark and just as violent, including "autistic people should be exterminated" and "autistic people should not be allowed to have children." My acquaintance encouraged his followers to write brief blog entries titled with more affirming ways to complete this phrase, such as "autistic people should be loved," so that other people who type in this phrase would first find more positive posts. I think this phrase can be useful to review and to analyze the arguments I have made in my own study.

Something must be seriously wrong with popular opinion if the first hits of such a public inquiry call for autism genocide. It is appropriate to ask where supposedly

ordinary people got such an appalling idea. They must believe in the severely negative metaphors used to characterize autism that are described in Chapter One. Surely, if many people are taught and believe that autism is an evil puzzle, a kidnapper, or a devil, such dire notions would help explain how a public expression of such hostility would contribute to a vivid popular vision of “a better day” for the world, one with a “spectrum-free” horizon. So entrenched is the medical model that people who stoop to suggest eugenics as a final solution to the autism “crisis” see only negatives associated with the pervasive disorder. They do not even stop to question what joy an autistic person may really feel and what a rich life is experienced behind the outwardly perceived blank, distant, socially disconnected expression that often occupies an autistic face. Outward perspectives are the only points of view that appear valid; powerful voices generated outside autistic experience are the only opinions effectively expressed. As a result, autism has successfully been cast as a burden, a blight, and a dread. Yet, after writing this study I see other more hopeful expressions which these popular culture selections suggest to complete this phrase. Some of them affirm autism, and some still need to be reevaluated and improved so that they may be closer to the truth.

“Autistic people should be recognized.” One aspect that all of these popular culture depictions share is that they recognize that autistic people exist and are part of the world. They add to the definition of autism; they offer some understanding and provide, at least, some reference point for us. This is important because it is progressive. Twenty years ago, if I had talked about autism to someone, he might spontaneously think of *Rain Man* since, for some time, the Oscar-winning film essentially served as the public’s only

reference point for autism; but Raymond Babbit's illustration of autistic savontism is such a rare condition that it is not an accurate depiction of most autism spectrum disorders. Thirty years ago, if I had mentioned autism to someone, he may not have even known what autism is because the condition was not as widely recognized: most autistic individuals were quietly sequestered behind institutional walls away from the public eye. However, now when I discuss autism, I can draw comparisons to Sheldon Cooper, Dr. Spencer Reid, Temple Grandin, and so many other widely-known characters. Not only do people in the general public recognize these names, they like these characters because they are cast members of prime-time shows that are so popular. I can immediately and easily reference and describe autism because of these representative characters, which makes popular culture a very powerful tool in autism awareness. Through exposure to media, people may realize that they know individuals like these characters in their own lives and may come to understand them better.

In Chapter One, I said that the metaphors presented in this study advance an autism identity; they help describe what being autistic is like. I believe this is especially true because these metaphors, symbols, and themes draw more from the social model. They describe people, not symptoms. Though some symbols may take certain symptoms of autism into account, they are more concerned with how those symptoms affect the character's personality. Furthermore, most of these metaphors ultimately do not portray autism as a problem. They advance the social model because, despite similar metaphors, symbols, and themes, each character remains unique. Sheldon Cooper is very different from Abed Nadir. Adrian Monk is not like Robert Goren. Even Dr. Brennan and Zack

Addy are not the same. They all may have the same condition, but they are not stereotypes, not only influenced by autism but by their own autonomous choices. They are individuals, just like everyone, anyone else.

"Autistic people should be respected." Ultimately, the majority of these characters can be seen as positive role models for autistic people. They contribute to society in meaningful ways. They are usually strong, independent, and able to make their own decisions, and they are usually respected because others appreciate their capabilities. Of course, they are human, and they all have weaknesses as well as strengths. Yet the scenarios presented in these shows and movies often focus on what autistic people can do rather than what they cannot do. They show what is possible, and that can inspire hope.

It is also important to remember that these characters are generally supported by a cast of characters who believe in them. The neurotypical characters may, at times, be irritated, even frustrated, by the autistic characters' weaknesses, but they never lose sight of the autistic characters' strengths. Most neurotypical characters in this study do all they can to encourage, to foster, and to improve those autistic strengths so that the autistic characters can be their best. Because of this, many of these neurotypical characters are good role models for neurotypicals as well as examples of how to interact with an autistic person.

"Autistic people should be accepted." We have seen in the costume metaphors that autistic people are trying to reveal who they are through their particular interests and that their rules for identity are not the same as neurotypical rules. Autistic people ought to feel free to claim their identities without shame, and neurotypical people should learn

to understand those rules so that they can come to accept autistic people. We also see in the detective motif that there is at least one functional place for autistic people in the world. Autistic people can use both their strengths and weaknesses to benefit society. Neurotypical people need to learn this as well so that they can accept autistic people better and allow autistic people to use their strengths to contribute in constructive ways to the greater good.

"Autistic people should be better understood." Here, I would like to take some time to criticize some of the metaphors I presented and express more of my concerns. I do feel that some negative stereotypes persist. Nearly all of these characters are seen as strictly scientifically or mathematically inclined, Abed being a possible exception. Popular culture seems to suggest that an autistic person would never be drawn to or excel in the liberal arts. Sheldon even moans, "Oh, the humanities!" at the mere thought of recognizing the other side of the academic continuum ("The Benefactor Factor"). However, I am certainly living proof that not all autistic people are left-brain dominant. In fact, Michael Fitzgerald postulates that several famous people in history that were associated with music, art, and literature were autistic, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, as mentioned in Chapter Five. Those in popular culture might consider providing depictions of autistic people who are more dominant in their right brain. Autistic individuals are capable of many more options for careers than simply detective work, and more people in the audience may identify with them.

Some of the metaphors I discuss in this study actually disturb me. I appreciate being thought of as honest, but other implications come with it. Neurotypical people

seem to believe that lying is endemic, intrinsic, and, therefore, comprehensible; but, ironically, they also think that there is something insidiously wrong with someone who never lies. When I first took psychology in high school, I completed a personality quiz that was mostly focused on honesty. I answered every question that in each situation that I would tell the truth because of my moral principals. When I calculated my score, which was very low, the answer key seriously said, “You are either lying or you’re not human.” I laughed and told others that this confirms that I am an alien, but thinking back, it was actually upsetting. Those who routinely uphold and pursue truth (and other rules) at all cost can be seen by the rest of the world as sub-human, and that is how autistic people are often portrayed. That is why I strongly support that epistemic responsibility, as discussed in Chapter Five, should become common knowledge, so that autistic people may be better understood and respected.

I also do not want to be disparaged because I act young or innocently. It does not mean I am a child or dependent. In fact, I take rather good care of myself. Sometimes I need help from others, but the same could be said for any person. Everyone needs help from time to time, even neurotypicals. Some people on the lower end of the spectrum may be a bit more dependent, but even autistic people who are nonverbal, like Amanda Baggs whom I mentioned in Chapter One, can function independently in society with the right accommodations. Even those who are dependent should not be disregarded; with the right support, perhaps a number of them can contribute to society as well. Finally, any view that autistic people are inherently violent must be corrected. The propensity for violence exists in all kinds of people, not only autistic people.

"Autistic people should be included." The reason I described the two public service announcements in the earlier chapter was not only to introduce metaphors from the autism community regarding relationships, but also to raise awareness that there is a very real concern in the autism community. Autistic people feel that they are not being included in a vital conversation that should heavily involve them. They feel that they are shut behind massive doors, speaking their concerns with nobody listening. "Nothing about us without us" is a statement from the disability movement that definitely applies to the autistic community. As seen in Chapter One, neurotypicals overwhelmingly control so-called autism advocacy organizations in today's world. In addition, all of the actors playing the autistic characters in this study are neurotypical. Tobin Siebers refers to non-disabled actors playing disabled characters as "disability drag" (114-16), which certainly points to the fact that such portrayals are not truly accurate. If popular culture is going to continue portraying autistic characters, the autism community should have involvement beyond consultation, actors doing research on autism, or interviewing autistic people. Autistic people should be more involved in the creative process, writing, producing, directing, and even acting in film and television. Then audiences can become more aware of what autism is really like and hear what autistic people really want to say.

It may not be such a good idea that so much of the diagnoses of these television characters remain speculative. Writers and actors may think that they maintain their artistic freedom by not attaching diagnoses to their characters, but actually they are hurting the autism community because they insinuate that one should feel ashamed of being autistic or having a disability. These characters should show autistic people that

claiming disability is part of claiming identity, and they need to verbalize more that, despite what neurotypicals may say, they are satisfied being the way that they are. Also, more films like the ones discussed in this study need to be made, but they should be more widely released. The films in this study are all thought provoking and highlight more of autism's strengths, but the general public was not made aware of most of them. So the general population is still more familiar with blockbusters, like *Rain Man*, which are not completely accurate depictions. If there were more films with a wider audience such as the ones discussed, there could be more understanding about autism.

I cannot say what will happen in the future. I do not know if the prevalence of autism will continue to rise or if, in the coming years, autistic people will be more of a minority than they are today. I do not know if popular culture will continue showing autistic characters, though it seems very unlikely that they are on the decline. For now, I can only hope that the better parts of these metaphors will continue and that acceptance for autistic people like me will grow. I hope what I have written in this study will make the hateful words at the beginning of this chapter disappear.

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