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“Because He Is Different”: Shifts in Discourse and the Increasing Presence of Autism in Fictional Television

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“BECAUSE HE IS DIFFERENT”: SHIFTS IN DISCOURSE AND THE INCREASING PRESENCE OF
AUTISM IN FICTIONAL TELEVISION

by

Sierra M. Wolff

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

“BECAUSE HE IS DIFFERENT”: SHIFTS IN DISCOURSE AND THE INCREASING PRESENCE OF AUTISM IN FICTIONAL TELEVISION

by

Sierra M. Wolff

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2018
Under the Supervision of Professor Elana Levine

Characters with an autism spectrum disorder are not new to media, television in particular. What has recently changed is the willingness to put a label on a character who is on the spectrum. This thesis looks at 21 characters in television from 2007 to 2017 who are labeled or are generally perceived to be autistic. I categorize these character representations by genre and find that representations of autism vary according to the characteristics of each genre. I also focus in more depth two series, ABC's *The Good Doctor* and Netflix's *Atypical*, which both premiered in 2017 with lead characters who were on the spectrum. This thesis uses textual analysis of characters and genre to identify shifts in depictions of autism on television since 2007. I find that, over time, these representations have increasingly correlated more with a social model of autism than a medical model. This representational progress is related to broader societal awareness and acceptance of autism in American society.

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There were times in which I did not know if I could finish this thesis and all these people in my life have been there to push me forward at different times. I cannot express how thankful I am for that.

I. Introduction

Autism has been a condition close to my family and myself for many years. Just before I turned 13, in 2007, my youngest brother was born. As he got older and his development did not progress at a typical rate, we knew something was off. He did not speak and he never made eye contact. It was not long before he was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome which at the time was not considered to be a form of autism, although it has since been included within the autism spectrum after changes to diagnostic criteria in the DSM-V in 2013. From then on, autism was a part of our lives. My brother did not utter his first word until he was nearly four years old. Only recently, at the age of 11, has he started to make consistent eye contact with people.

In my schooling, I have done quite a few projects on autism. I have done numerous papers about how the diagnosis and definitions of autism have changed or on the debates surrounding vaccines and autism. Oddly enough, I have never before taken a serious look at how the depictions of autism in the media may be a result of and also influence the public's perception of autism. Looking back at this, it is odd that I never tied the two together because media hold such a presence in people's lives. They have the power to influence how we see something and whether or not a society is accepting of the topic. Autism is no exception to this.

Interestingly, autism makes far more appearances on screen than I had noted before starting this work. In the midst of working on the proposal for this thesis, my best friend decided to show me an episode of the television show *Private Practice*. Part of her reason to do so was because the series had an episode that engaged in the debate on autism and vaccines and she knew of my research interests. This episode, "Contamination," aired in January 2009 during the show's second season. The episode aired in the midst of broader public debate about the impact of vaccines on autism and it engaged with both sides. It also looked at autism through the lens of a medical professional who is stuck between treating a patient and respecting a parent's wishes.

It is very likely that the episode sparked some debates amongst viewers, especially because it took a pro-vaccination stance. Whether or not that was the case, the episode is important because it shows how prominent issues in society can and often do influence fictional representations, and how fictional representations have the potential to influence social discourse. The timing of the episode is of great importance because it is an early example that reveals the ways media representations of autism have changed over the last ten years.

The year 2007 was not only significant for my brother's birth and the beginning of my own family's understanding of autism; it was also a significant moment of greater public awareness of autism, and debate over its causes. Media coverage around the question of whether vaccines can cause autism escalated in 2007. One reason for this was the release of the book, *Louder Than Words: A Mother's Journey in Healing Autism*, by actress Jenny McCarthy. In this book and her subsequent interviews, McCarthy talks about her experience as a mother with an autistic child and how she handled not only the diagnosis but the raising of her child. During the writing of the book, McCarthy also was talking with hundreds of other parents of children with autism who shared the same concerns and fears about vaccines being what caused their children's autism. For many, autism was a scary diagnosis for their child to receive because there was (and still is) no definitive cause for the condition. Autism also does not have a cure or universal treatment.¹ For some time following McCarthy's book release the debate on autism and vaccines raged on. More and more news outlets covered the subject and the topic started to bleed into everyday conversations and into fictional representations.

In my thesis, I explore discourses of and about autism in media between 2007 and 2017. I was interested in the discourses circulating in news and in fictional representations in scripted

¹ E.C Yochim, & V.T. Silva, "Everyday Expertise, Autism, and 'Good' Mothering in the Media Discourse of Jenny McCarthy," in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, no 10, (2013), 408-409.

television series. Over the last decade, I have seen a shift in the presence that autism has in media, a shift that has grown more and more prevalent over the last couple of years. I believe that this shift has brought greater onscreen presence to autism. Some of these instances have provided a look at families dealing with autism and others have provided more agency to fictional characters with autism. I looked to see how society and fictional media representations feed off of each other in discussing a topic such as autism. I believe that a shift has started to occur in society which has helped autism to have a greater presence in both the media and the public than previously seen.

In my thesis, I trace these societal shifts through my analysis of past media representations of autism. The larger question I look to answer is how media engage with autism and how media representations and societal views feed off of and shape each other. I am interested in exploring how a shift in public discourse may have helped in pushing autism into a larger role in fictional representations. I look at fictional representations to see how they depict autism and what potential shifts there have been in depictions over time. I discuss the more common depictions of autism over the last decade with a larger focus on current television shows that have recently seemed to signify a difference in how autism appears onscreen. I look to answer the question of the role television may play in the shaping of public attitudes and identities in general through my example of representations of autism.

One of the most significant aspects of these shifts in discourses of autism in media is what it means for people like my little brother. I grew up with severe mental health issues and never felt that I could connect with someone on television who was like me. Luckily, as there has been an increase in autism on screen, my brother has gotten to grow up seeing these shifts. The hope is that these changes are positive and show more inclusivity than in the past. Importantly, he has gotten to see versions or at least aspects of himself that I never felt I had as a kid with my

own issues. The changes I believe I am seeing regarding autism are important not only to my family and me, but also to others who have a connection to autism.

Literature Review

In recent years, the representations of disability in media and of autism in particular have shifted. These shifts in media representation mark a shift in the discourse and knowledge around such subjects. Disability studies is not new but it has not generated as much work from scholars as have issues such as race or sexuality. The mid-1960s through the mid-1980s saw an increase in scholarly works on disability but connections between disability studies and media studies have remained few.² Often, disability studies discuss media and the role that media play in these shifts of discourse and representation but there has not been much tying the fields of disability studies and media studies together. In this literature review, I briefly look at the importance of television in order to establish why I have chosen to view representations of autism through that medium. I also discuss the previous work from both disability studies and media studies scholars while looking at the past research on both news coverage and fictional representations of autism.

In this study, I have found that the shifts in depictions of autism are tied to shifts in broader societal awareness. Society first gained increased awareness of autism with the vaccine debates in 2007 and awareness has since shifted away from strict fear and panic and toward an interest in understanding autism. This change over time is related to the growing visibility of the autism community through social media and the rise of activism around autism and other forms of disability, as well as changes in diagnostic criteria.

Why Television?

² Katie Ellis and Gerard Goggin, *Disability and the Media. Key Concerns in Media Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 24-25.

Across the world, media enable communication and we are a culture of mass media consumers. Media such as film, television, and news have a huge impact on public attitudes.³ The influence that media hold can force a change in the assumptions about a group of people which make media work as a blueprint of the cultural codes of society.⁴ In Lori Kido Lopez's work on disability, she states that the responsibility of media is to attempt to represent the world as accurately as possible. However, representation in media is a double-edged sword. There cannot be social change without a degree of recognition but representation can also bring out stereotypes that cause further marginalization.⁵

The constant repetition of an image, particularly through a medium like television, gives those images symbolic power to speak for an entire group of people. Television is an important form of media consumption because it plays a large part in the shaping of what society deems to be normal or abnormal.⁶ As television became an increasingly influential force in American life, it was seen as having the potential to create new outlooks and more understanding attitudes. It was a part of changing how people think of themselves and how they relate to their world.⁷ Television is now a major aspect of the media landscape in many societies and it is a crucial site for the forming of meaning and cultural values.⁸

Looking at fictional television representations is important in part because some scholars have noted that fiction is the main way that society negotiates new meanings. Fiction can help in

³ S.P. Safran, "Disability Portrayal in Film: Reflecting the Past, Directing the Future," *Exceptional Children* 64 no. 2, (1998): 227-238
<https://ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=ejh&AN=590759&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁴ Haller.

⁵ Lori Kido Lopez, "Chapter 4: How to Stare at your Television: The Ethics of Consuming Race and Disability," In *Disability Media Studies: Media Popular Culture, and the Meanings of Disability*. (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

⁶ Ellis & Goggin.

⁷ Horace Newcomb, "The Responses to Television," in *TV: The Most Popular Art*, (Anchor Books, 1974).

⁸ Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz, "Introduction: Why Television Studies? Why Now?" in *Television Studies* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012), 1-25.

making cultural values visible, especially during social transitions.⁹ People become attached to fiction because, “We want to hear stories about people, imaginary or not, so that we can imagine, think about, and dissect their mental states and relationships.”¹⁰ Much of our understanding of topics like disability comes from the media because without representations of disability, and other minorities, stereotypes of them have more weight in society.¹¹

Why Autism?

In 2001, 191 countries adopted a new definition of disability. This definition states that disability is about the interaction between one’s health and the environment and personal factors. Scholars Katie Ellis and Gerard Goggin have noted in their work that one’s environment has a major impact on the way that disability is experienced. A key environmental factor is the awareness and attitudes the non-disabled hold toward the disabled.¹² Disability studies scholar Beth Haller, as well as other scholars in the community, use the term ableism to refer to able-bodied individuals. This term refers to the way that disabled people are regularly stereotyped or ignored due to dominant beliefs of an able body being normal and accepted.¹³ Society forms what disability is in response to the experiences and fears of impairments in the human body and mind.¹⁴

Having societal awareness of disability often creates a divide between the people who are abled and the people who are not. As time has gone on, there have been shifts in these views and approaches to disability. With the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, scholars like Haller found that some of the stereotypes of the disabled were challenged.

⁹ Nickianne Moody, “Methodological Agendas: Disability-informed Criticism and the Incidental Representation of Autism in Popular Fiction.” In *Popular Narrative Media* 1, no. 1 (2008): 25-41.

¹⁰ Jennifer L. Barnes, “Fiction, Imagination, and Social Cognition: Insights from Autism,” *Poetics* 40, no. 4 (2012): 299-316 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2012.05.001>.

¹¹ Ellis & Goggin.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ Haller, 67-68.

¹⁴ Ellis & Goggin, 8.

Disability activists helped with the wording of the law which in turn helped to give the government, news, and the public different frames for understanding disability.¹⁵ Even with the agreed upon definition in 2001, the understanding of disability has continued to evolve. The current understandings that society holds around disability have changed due to growing acceptance of disability in daily life and the acknowledgment of it socially, politically, and culturally.¹⁶ Because of this acceptance, there have been greater amounts of media representation in recent years.

Many disability scholars like Ellis and Goggin discuss the importance of the different models for disability in society: the medical model and the social model. The medical model is the one that is prominent in a majority of society currently. This model looks at the biological and medical causes of disability. It is the idea that there is a physical cause for disability which means that it can be cured or managed. If the underlying cause is cured, then the disability is gone.¹⁷ Disability studies scholars and those within disability communities take on the social model. This model is about the validation of lived experiences of those with disabilities.¹⁸ I use these models as a way of discussing the changes in representations of autism over the last decade.

Autism is a term that was first used in a medical diagnosis in 1943 by Leo Kanner. Since then, autism has become known as a spectrum disorder with a continuum of severity and a wide variety of traits. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) provides standard criteria for mental disorders. Autism was not part of this manual until 1980 when the DSM-III came out. The most recent manual, the DSM-V, was released in 2013 and changed the definition of autism again. In this manual, autism is placed into 4 criteria:

¹⁵ Haller, 49.

¹⁶ Ellis & Goggin, 30.

¹⁷ Ibid., 21-22.

¹⁸ Ellcesor & Kirkpatrick, 5.

1. Deficits in social behaviors
2. Restrictive and repetitive behaviors
3. The symptoms of the first two categories are present in ages eight years old and younger
4. Symptoms limit every day functions when together¹⁹

These criteria are the general indicators of autism but there are expanded markers within the DSM-V. Another change to the definition of autism was the inclusion of Asperger's Syndrome. Scholar Tasha Oren has noted in her work that this condition was previously considered to be a separate condition but it has now been placed into the expanded definition of autism spectrum disorder.²⁰ Autism is often viewed as a medical mystery according to scholar Sonya Loftis because the cause is unknown, there is no known cure, and there is no real medication or treatment.²¹ While this information on autism is merely a general overview of the condition, I use it as a basis for discussing the portrayals of people with autism in fictional television in the hopes of seeing which traits are referenced and which are not.

Since the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, the disability rights movement and disability studies have gained a greater presence in society. Loftis has found that until recently, people with autism have been largely excluded from the movement. The autistic community has come out in recent years and challenged the way that autism is shown and the public's perception of it.²² In 2006, the United Nations adopted new conventions for the rights of people with disabilities and these conventions are marked as a paradigm shift in the attitudes and approaches

¹⁹ Alexandria Prochnow, "An Analysis of Autism through Media Representation," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 71, no. 2 (2014): 134-135, <https://ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=aph&AN=99149554&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²⁰ Tasha Oren. "Chapter 9: Autism in Translation: Temple Grandin as the Autistic Subject," in *Disability Media Studies: Media Popular Culture, and the Meanings of Disability*, ed. Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick (New York: New York University Press, 2017), chap 9, Kindle.

²¹ Sonya Loftis, *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 4.

²² Loftis, 5.

to autism.²³ In 2008, the United Nations General Assembly voted to have the first World Autism Awareness Day on April 2 of that year. Over the years companies like Starbucks and Barnes and Noble and events like NASCAR stock car races held events for autism. These motions by the United Nations and people in both the disability and the autism communities have helped in increasing the public discourse around autism. However, this increased discourse does not mean that people understand autism.²⁴

News Coverage and Autism

Although I am not studying potential changes in news coverage on autism, it is important to discuss the way that news media have framed autism in the past. Often, the negative portrayal of disability in media is discussed by scholars but the news media is not always the subject of said studies. Yet the public often interprets physical and mental disability mostly through media, especially news media.²⁵ The news has the important social function of providing information to citizens. For Haller, the content of the news is shaped by dominant societal beliefs. The societal beliefs around disability alter the way that news covers, or does not cover, disability issues.²⁶ Ellis and Goggin found that in the last 30 years, there has been an increased interest in how disability is portrayed in the news. As greater understanding around disability came forward, advocacy groups responded to the inaccuracy of the portrayal of disability. This led to media organizations, editors, and journalists developing a set of guidelines on how to cover disability.²⁷

²³ Stuart Murray, *Representing Autism : Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 6.

²⁴ Paul Heilker & Melanie Yergeau, "Autism and Rhetoric," *College English*, 73, no. 5 (2011): 485-486, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23052337>.

²⁵ Avery E. Holton, Laura C. Farrell, and Julie L. Fudge, "A Threatening Space?: Stigmatization and the Framing of Autism in the News," *Communication Studies* 65, no. 2 (2014): 189-190, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2013.855642>.

²⁶ Haller, 67.

²⁷ Ellis & Goggin, 67.

Scholars such as Avery Holton, Laura Farrell, and Julie Fudge have stated that it is important to note that the media does not cause stigma about topics like autism but it does often represent and reinforce societal views, both the positive and the negative.²⁸ Seok Kang notes that the media can have an influence on the perceptions the public has of disability. It can also affect the services the government provides, since policymakers depend on the media for some of their health information as well.²⁹ According to work from Dixon, Graham, and Clarke in 2013, the news media is where most people get their health-related information. With the news media portrayal of the vaccine-autism controversy, “Health officials have argued that coverage of autism-vaccine controversy increased public uncertainty about vaccine safety and decreased vaccine uptake.”³⁰ Studies have supported this argument, finding that when the news media reported on this controversy, the public confidence in vaccinations declined.³¹

Journalists often focus on the causes and cures of autism, covering topics such as potential links between autism and vaccines. Scholars Holton, Farrell, and Fudge have noted that the rise in the media presence of autism has not improved the image of autism because news stories often present autism as shameful, isolating, as a burden, and as a disruption in the lives of others. Up until the mid-1990s, diagnoses of autism were not discussed in the public sphere so public awareness on the condition was uncommon. A major change in the coverage of autism in the news was following a study in 1998 that suggested there was a link between autism and vaccines. Although the study was retracted in 2010, the news media continued to provide mixed messages about the link which left people fearful.³² This research was criticized greatly by

²⁸ Holton et al., 195.

²⁹ Seok Kang, "Coverage of Autism Spectrum Disorder in the US Television News: An Analysis of Framing," In *Disability & Society* 28, no. 2 (2013): 246, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.705056>.

³⁰ Graham Dixon and Christopher Clarke, "The Effect of Falsely Balanced Reporting of the Autism–vaccine Controversy on Vaccine Safety Perceptions and Behavioral Intentions," In *Health Education Research* 28, no. 2 (2013): 352, <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cys110>.

³¹ Dixon, et al, 352.

³² Holton, 191.

medical and scientific professionals but it gained the attention of the public, the media, and the government. This helped in creating a sense of doubt regarding the safety of vaccines which then led to a decrease in the rate of vaccinations.³³

Holton and other scholars have found that journalists more often will equate mental disabilities like autism with violent and dangerous tendencies, instability, and hopelessness. Journalists have also been found to neglect to show the thoughts and reactions of other people or the societal focus on disability.³⁴ Kang notes that most of the previous research on autism in the news was referring only to print media. This is relatively odd because television news is the most viewed medium that audiences use to get informed. Television news often emphasizes family struggles and personal responsibilities. The large increase that has been seen in autism coverage between 2004 and 2010 is based in the fact that the number of children diagnosed with autism increased.³⁵ The fear around a link between autism and vaccines on top of all the unknowns around autism led not only to movements against vaccinations for children but also to increased public knowledge. While the changes in news coverage of autism potentially parallel changes in fictional representations, they are not something I analyze because the coverage of autism in the news media has not been as present as it was early on in the autism vaccine controversy.

Autism and Television

Often, media studies is the field to turn to when discussing issues of representation. That being said, the representation of disability in media has not been a frequent area of focus within media studies, so most research comes from disability studies scholars. In my thesis, I take a media studies approach. The images that circulate through media about disability speak to the

³³ Avery Holton, Brooke Weberling, Christopher E. Clarke, and Michael J. Smith, "The Blame Frame: Media Attribution of Culpability About the MMR–Autism Vaccination Scare," *Health Communication* 27, no. 7 (2012): 690, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2011.633158>.

³⁴ Holton, 203.

³⁵ Kang, 255.

actual experiences of autism yet also perpetuate stereotypes. These stereotypes distract from the lived experience of disability and prevent society from understanding and in turn accepting disability. Ellis and Goggin have noted in their work that in the media, disability is often viewed as a tragedy and as something that needs to be overcome. Many also forget that people with disabilities are a part of media in a number of ways. They are subjects, audiences, consumers, and users. The lack of cultural representation stems from a lack of attention to impairment and the individual experience.³⁶ In this thesis, I offer a general idea of how the portrayals of autism have changed over the last decade, leading up to current shows that have characters with autism at the forefront.

Television is one of many media formats that offer representations of disability. Research on disability in television has not been updated much since the 1990s in terms of analyzing actual depictions, but some organizations have provided statistics on the number of characters with disabilities on United States television shows. While representations of disabilities in television have increased over time, Ellis and Goggin note that during the 2010-2011 television schedule, only around one percent of regular characters had a disability of some sort. Within the next two years, this number dropped to 0.06 percent. Contrasting this, as of 2013, the number of United States citizen living with a disability was around 12 percent. On top of not having much research on disabled characters on television, there is only a handful of research on disabled audience members. The issue with this is that studies have shown that having one or two main characters with a disability could drastically help in changing social attitudes.³⁷ Media representations can never accurately portray social groups as they are in reality and autism is no exception to that. Autism as a condition has too wide of a definition and the people within the

³⁶ Ellis & Goggin, 87-90.

³⁷ Ibid., 81, 95-96.

community are too unique for the full reality of the condition to appear in media.³⁸ Even though the numbers that Ellis and Goggin present look bad, there is still an increase in the presence of disability in television and other forms of media. The presence of autism has increased in popular texts and the narratives about it are becoming a larger part of culture.

Often, mainstream cultural narratives misrepresent autism. The characters have predictable traits and do not show the range of autism; the portrayals are often repetitive. Autism is seen in the media as something that affects people. The stories around it are about worry, fear, and an unknown threat that needs to be addressed.³⁹ Scholar Anthony Baker has argued that people with autism are generally portrayed as being exotic, mostly due to the unknowns about the condition. The characters with autism are used as a plot device in media rather than as individuals.⁴⁰ This is important to note because it places these characters as being outside of the main group, thus characterizing the person with autism as someone outside the norm.

Scholar Stuart Murray has found that the most common portrayal of autistic characters is as savants. Savants are people who have abilities that seem impossible or beyond normal behaviors. These abilities are usually mathematical or memory skills.⁴¹ Baker goes further and notes that other characters focus in on how those special skills can be used and the autistic character is only valuable if they have these skills. The savant skills that the autistic character has are not used for their own gain, which leaves the characters with no agency and the inability to develop further.⁴² The decisions to make an autistic character appear incredible and with a sense

³⁸ Prochnow, 133-134.

³⁹ Murray, 65-66.

⁴⁰ Anthony D. Baker, "Chapter 12: Recognizing Jake: Contending with Formulaic and Spectacularized Representations of Autism in Film," in *Autism and Representation*, ed. Mark Osteen (Routledge, 2009), 231.

⁴¹ Murray, 66-67.

⁴² Baker, 234-235.

of wonder through these incredible abilities push them further into a world of fantasy and continue the lack of knowledge and understanding of autism in the society.⁴³

Most people came to know of the existence of autism through the 1988 film *Rain Man*. In his work on *Rain Man*, Baker notes that this film brought the condition to the global stage like never before. This type of depiction of autism has been avoided in more recent times because it is dated. Experts were consulted in the making of the film, but knowledge on autism in the 1980s was partial. Hoffman's portrayal of the character became the blueprint for the depiction of autism for years to come. The character was a savant and his depiction as being a savant and having autism made the public believe that savantism and autism were common. Savant-like abilities are actually very rare in autistic people. Without a clear definition of autism, then, the physical acting choices Hoffman made became what people believed to be the standard for autism.⁴⁴

Baker views *Rain Man* as important to discuss because for a long time it was the template for how the condition was represented and some ideas from that representation still exist in media today. In the 1990s, a number of films followed *Rain Man*'s popularity and the increasing public interest in autism and created films with autistic characters. Each of these characters with autism had special, savant-like skills. Since the 1990s, the depictions of autism in film have slowly gained greater variety and Asperger's has become a common depiction. As the definition and understanding of autism changes, so to do the stories about it.⁴⁵

Since *Rain Man* and the films that followed it in the 1990s, the way the public views autism has shifted. A major factor in the changes in how autism is viewed has been the debates around whether or not vaccines cause autism. Murray notes that the rise in the debates around

⁴³ Murray, 99.

⁴⁴ Baker, 236.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 235-236.

vaccines as a cause of autism paralleled the increase in portrayals.⁴⁶ A prominent figure in this debate was Jenny McCarthy. In 2005, her son was diagnosed with autism and by 2007, she had written her first book about how she was handling that diagnosis and what she believed was the best course of treatment. At the time that her son was diagnosed, there still was not much information on the condition and many parents like her turned to networking with one another. A common belief they formed was that medical professionals could not be trusted. As McCarthy gained popularity, she became the leader of movements for green vaccines and no vaccines. This movement against vaccines and the belief that they were the cause of autism came out of the distrust in medical professionals who were seen by McCarthy and other parents as knowingly causing autism as a way to make money.⁴⁷

Murray notes that for some time after this movement, the narratives of autism were around it being an epidemic.⁴⁸ In recent years, people like Temple Grandin, who has been diagnosed as on the autism spectrum, have been the subject of multiple biopics. Oren states that Grandin is seen as a human translator of animals but also as a translator of the autistic experience because of her diagnosis. The stories focused on her came out during times when the understanding and cultural visibility of autism were shifting such as when the definitions changed and during the vaccine scares.⁴⁹

In more recent years, scholars like Oren have found that contemporary television has included characters who either are openly diagnosed as autistic or who have been seen to be autistic by critics and the community. These series include *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-present), *The Bridge* (FX, 2013), *Bones* (FOX 2005-2017), *Community* (NBC and Yahoo!

⁴⁶ Murray, 134-135.

⁴⁷ Yochim & Silva, 407.

⁴⁸ Murray, 73.

⁴⁹ Oren, Chapter 9, Kindle.

Screen, 2009-2015), and *Parenthood* (NBC, 2010-2015).⁵⁰ Even with the increase in media presence, Murray notes that there has not been much of a revision of public knowledge.⁵¹ The experiences that people have with the autism spectrum vary widely. With the changing definitions, scattered media coverage, and portrayals of mainly savantism and autism, the public still has not gained a clear image of the variety of characteristics that make up the autism spectrum.

There is not much research looking at disability and television let alone autism and television. Much of the research that can be found on autism that may tie to television is a few academic texts on how autism is framed in television news such as work done by Graham Dixon and Avery Holton. Where research is lacking is in discussing autism in television entertainment. Currently, characters in television shows who have autism have gone from the background to the foreground. In my research, I dip into this missing piece and take a closer look at television series currently on air with main characters who are on the autism spectrum.

Theory, Methods, and Chapter Breakdown

In my thesis I talk about the significance of the changes in autism on screen because of the importance of representation and identity formation. Media play a role in how we form identities and television is no exception to this. Theorist Stuart Hall did a great deal of work looking into both the importance of representation and in how identities are formed. The meaning that we give things in the world is constructed and completely dependent “on the relationship between things in the world – people, objects and events, real or fictional – and the conceptual systems, which can operate as mental representations of them.”⁵² From this meaning

⁵⁰ Oren, Chapter 9, Kindle.

⁵¹ Murray, 10-11.

⁵² Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), 173.

come cultural codes. These help in giving fixed meanings to things even though those meanings may be arbitrary. Hall also notes that meaning and representation come from culture.⁵³

In his work on identity, Hall ties in representation with the formation of identity. Without accurate representation, the formation of one's identity is difficult. Identities are constructed through otherness (difference). They are "about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves."⁵⁴ The representations we see in life, and in this case television, are what help us to form our identities. Hall states that we may form our identities from within but we are still influenced by our surroundings and the media are a major part of those surroundings.⁵⁵

In my second chapter, I conduct a survey of television shows between 2007 and 2017 that have had autistic characters in them. This chapter is about attempting to see if there has been any sort of increase in depictions of autism over time and if those depictions offer any variety. To do this, I look at examples of autistic characters over the selected time period. I select episodes from a few shows from different genres such as medical or crime series. I have chosen these shows based on conversations from both people involved in or critiquing the shows and from the disability community. These shows and/or characters have been compiled from lists that have been made by both television critics and writers from the disability community. I organize the examples I have found by genre and select key examples from each category to discuss in more depth. Looking at the depictions of autism within certain genres allows me to see how each genre tackles (or avoids) autism. I look to see if certain genres showcase the condition in different

⁵³ Ibid., 185.

⁵⁴ Stuart Hall, "Who Needs Identity," *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996), 353.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 352.

ways from one another and what that says about past depictions of autism. I also assess whether there are stereotypes perpetuated within these texts. Finally, I use this survey to see if there are gradual changes in depictions of autism over time.

In my third chapter, I look closely at both *Atypical* on Netflix and *The Good Doctor* on ABC because both are focused on main characters with autism. The more detailed textual analysis allowed me to be more specific in highlighting the differences and similarities in depictions of autism between the previous shows and these newer ones that I have examined. I have chosen these two shows not only because they are centered on main characters who are clearly labeled as autistic but also because they are timely. *Atypical* was released on Netflix in August of 2017 and *The Good Doctor* premiered on ABC in September of 2017. The series *Atypical* has eight episodes while *The Good Doctor* has eighteen. For both, I viewed all the episodes of their first seasons and then discussed certain scenes within each series that are important to this larger discussion of autism on television. I look to mannerisms, the types of diagnosis of each character, and the way other characters approach them. The importance of doing a textual analysis is that texts are where audiences gain meaning. The textual analysis is used to help in evaluating the meanings found within certain texts and how those meanings create social realities.⁵⁶ Within my textual analysis I look at a brief portion of history on how autism has been shown on screen in comparison to more current depictions. Do the stereotypical portrayals still show up? How do these shows match up to each other with their depictions? Where did this shift in depiction come from? These are questions I intend to address within this chapter.

⁵⁶ Bonnie S. Brennen, "Textual Analysis," in *Qualitative Research for Media Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 193.

The fourth and final chapter discusses the implications of my research and what further research can be done. In this chapter, I summarize the second and third chapters. From there I discuss the limitations to my research and what routes future research could head into. I close the chapter discussing the implications of my findings in this thesis.

II: A Decade of Autism on Television

When *Rain Man* first came out in 1988, Dustin Hoffman's performance as Raymond Rabbit was groundbreaking. The problem today is that it became a blueprint for how autism would be shown on screen, even as the range of the condition and the understanding of it evolved. In keeping with *Rain Man*, since that time characters on screen that are autistic or perceived to be so have tended to have the staple traits of having issues with eye contact, lacking in empathy, misreading social cues, and having savant-like abilities/high intelligence. Often, when a character is openly autistic on screen, the condition is used as a way to further the plot. Characters in these instances are only valued for what they can do for other characters and once that is done, they are not a needed part of the story. The overall goal of this chapter is to examine the specific ways in which autistic characters have been represented on television in recent years, and how those representations may have changed over time and in relationship to characters' positions within particular TV genres.

I have compiled a list of 21 characters from 18 fictional, scripted American television series between 2007 through 2017. Within this, 12 of the characters were not diagnosed with autism as part of the narrative and 8 were diagnosed. The last character I look at is one that is self-diagnosed but does not showcase traits of autism. Within the time frame I studied, there were very likely more than these 21 characters. What I attempted to do was chose the ones that were seemingly of the greatest significance. I assessed significance by considering which characters were important to viewers, especially to those closely tied in their own lives to autism spectrum disorders, because of their diagnosis on their respective shows or because of traits that viewers could relate to and associate with autism. I selected many of these character choices after reading popular press articles that discuss ASD on television. The choices in characters to

include was also based on discussions of these characters on websites focused on autism or disability in general.

This chapter helps us to see what autism has looked like on television in the recent past. This period corresponds with a time frame within which the presence of autism in media in general started to rise, in 2007, through 2017, when some new representations appeared with a somewhat different perspective. These are the focus of Chapter Three. Because autism is a spectrum disorder, “autism” is an umbrella term that describes a very wide range of behaviors. Common tropes for a character that is autistic include struggling with eye contact and communication, issues with empathy, and missing out on social cues. While these traits are typical of some real-world autistic people, no person with an autism spectrum disorder will show all the traits of another. Every aspect of autism cannot be represented on screen because of the wide range of the actual disorder, but media creators can nonetheless steer away from stereotypes in order to provide greater understanding.

My separation of these representations into different genres demonstrates the range of ways in which autism is depicted on screen. Looking to genre showcases one way in which the range of depictions can be categorized, as each genre also represents autism in some different ways. The specifics of each genre call for the autistic characters to be used in specific ways in order to further the larger story and the audience’s expectations of that genre. Looking at characters based upon genre provides a glimpse into how the characters share some traits of autism but how, within each genre, those traits are employed in differing ways.

My goal in this chapter is not to do an in-depth analysis of every character I have discovered. Instead, I have grouped the characters into genres and use the genres as categories to analyze. The genres I am looking at are: crime, family drama, children’s television, medical drama, and sitcom. Because I am surveying a wide range of representations, I do not discuss all

of them in depth. Instead, I focus on a few key aspects of all of the representations and explore those aspects in detail for my main examples within each genre. The first aspect I identify is whether or not the character is clearly diagnosed as autistic or simply shows enough traits to be deemed autistic by a large majority of viewers. The second aspect I tracked was whether or not these characters were main/recurring or characters that I refer to as limited-appearance characters, which means they appear in three episodes or less in the series. Within each genre for which I found examples, I analyze one or more characters' representations in more depth, considering how their definition (or not) as autistic and their status and role within the narrative and the genre shape the resulting depiction of autism. My goal is to consider not only how representations have varied across genres but also how they have or have not changed over the ten-year period I survey.

The Crime Genre

The crime genre of television is the one that had the most instances of characters who were on the spectrum from 2007 to 2017. In this genre, I looked at eight characters: Temperance Brennan and Zack Addy in *Bones* (FOX, 2005-2017), Spencer Reid in *Criminal Minds* (CBS, 2005-present), Sonya Cross in *The Bridge* (FX, 2013), Holly Gibney in *Mr. Mercedes* (Audience, 2-17-present), Fiona Helbron in *Elementary* (CBS, 2012-present), Abby Sciuto in *NCIS* (CBS, 2003-present), and Will Graham in *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-2015).⁵⁷ While seven of those were main or recurring characters, only one of the eight was diagnosed as being autistic (Fiona Helbron is the only limited-appearance character and the only openly autistic one). Each of these characters are crucial to the plot due to their perceived or labeled autism. While they are

⁵⁷ It is important to note that there were some series such as CBS' *Scorpion* that did not get included in this section. This was because there was not enough consistent discussion of the potentially autistic characters in question. For the scope of this thesis, I chose to focus on characters that were very often discussed as being on the spectrum.

made to be important because of the traits that accompany autism, many of these characters in this genre do not receive a label.

Every character on this list exhibits the common traits of being socially awkward and of having high intellect, among some other traits. *Bones* (2005-2017) was a series that stood out for some in the autism community because it had two characters that could fall onto the spectrum. The series follows a team of forensic anthropologists who work with the FBI to solve murders. Both Zack Addy and Temperance Brennan - who is a lead character - stood out in their literal thinking and blunt responses to other characters. Both characters also stood out early on in the series due to their lack of empathy. Brennan shows this often when she is overly detailed to families of victims and misses out on the ways those detail are upsetting to the families. They both also miss out on sarcasm and are coached by others in the series in order to grasp it. Zack is a clearer representation of autism for viewers although he is still not a labeled character. Even Brennan's actress Emily Deschanel considered Zack to be on the spectrum.⁵⁸ He is seen as such because he has a genius IQ, great memory skills, follows routines, and is socially isolated. Meanwhile, Brennan has been referred to by Deschanel as almost having Asperger's syndrome.⁵⁹ She is placed onto the spectrum by the autism community because, although not widely shown on screen, women are on the spectrum but are simply harder to diagnose due to presenting the condition differently.⁶⁰ Brennan is a lead character, a woman, and shares traits that may place her on the spectrum, which makes her a character that viewers, particularly those in the autism community, connect with.

Another very popular character that is viewed as being autistic both within the autism community and even outside of it is Spencer Reid on the crime series *Criminal Minds* (2005-

⁵⁸ Ellen Gray. "Boreanaz Says 'Bones' Is Not Procedural," in *The Inquirer*, (Philly.com, 2007).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ JR Thorpe, "Why Are There So Few Women with Autism on TV?" *Bustle*, <https://www.bustle.com/p/why-are-there-so-few-women-with-autism-on-tv-71248>.

present). He is one of the main characters, having appeared in nearly all episodes in the series thus far. Spencer Reid is known for his intelligence and multiple PhDs but it is often in his actions that people find him to be on the spectrum. Reid often misses out on jokes and sarcasm but he also misses out on cues from others. This is especially apparent in most episodes when he goes off on a long-winded monologue about facts about the case the team is working on. Reid's physical traits, such as running his hands together (stimming), are something he does when nervous or over stimulated. He also has a tendency to be clumsy, which can be common among people with Asperger's syndrome. Another aspect to Reid's characterization is that he has only been shown as romantically interested in one person through the series run thus far. This character is one he connected with over a number of episodes in the eighth season but she never moves past being a brief supporting character in the series. The two mainly talked over the phone and Reid often missed out on how her tone was indicating that she was flirting with him. She was killed in front of him, by a suspect, which was also the only time they saw each other in person.⁶¹

Temperance Brennan and Spencer Reid are significant because they are main characters that exhibit the basic traits of autism. These characters are liked by those inside and outside of the autism community and their characteristics tend to be what draw viewers in. *Bones* creator Hart Hansen has stated that, had the series been on cable, Brennan would have been labeled as autistic since she was partly based off of a friend he has who is on the spectrum. Being on network television, the series and its characters needed to have a wider appeal, so labeling her as such would not have worked when the series started in 2005.⁶² The views on Temperance Brennan and her potential place on the spectrum might have been different if the series were to

⁶¹ "Zugzwang." *Criminal Minds*, season 8, episode 12, CBS, 16 Jan. 2013.

⁶² Alan Sepinwall, "How TV Shows Try (or Choose Not) to Depict Asperger's Syndrome: Sepinwall on TV." *NJ.com*, https://www.nj.com/entertainment/tv/index.ssf/2010/02/how_tv_shows_try_or_choose_not.html.

start today because of increased awareness of autism but in 2005, it was not a condition that a larger audience would fully understand.

Before discussing another genre, the character of Fiona Helbron in *Elementary* (a US-based adaptation of Sherlock Holmes) is worth looking at because she is the only character I have identified in the crime genre that is clearly labeled as autistic. All the other characters I viewed, some of which I have discussed, are not labeled as autistic within their respective series. In her first of three appearances on the show, she is initially a murder suspect.⁶³ She is ruled out by Sherlock upon meeting her because he realizes that she is autistic and Sherlock establishes that she cannot tell a lie. After this is established, Fiona spends this episode and her other two appearances helping Sherlock in solving a couple of his cases.⁶⁴ The series also establishes her as being obsessed with computer programming and cats. On the plus side, this character is a woman, which is rare, and she is labeled as autistic in the series. On the other hand, she is placed in the stereotype of being good with technology. There is also some issue with her not being able to tell a lie because although literal and sometimes blunt, those on the spectrum do not generally have the inability to lie.

Often, autistic characters are written to have some sort of extraordinary ability that can sometimes come across similar to a superpower. These abilities provide entertainment for the audience and easy ways to solve the problems of a season or episode. However, these immense abilities to solve these problems in unique ways often make these characters serve as nothing more than a plot device to move the story along or to bolster the other, more prominent characters around them. Often times, a character like Spencer Reid will be brought on screen to give a detailed definition or answer to something that no one else on screen can understand. The

⁶³ "Murder Ex Machina." *Elementary*, season 4, episode 9, CBS, 21 Jan. 2016.

⁶⁴ The character later appears in "A View from a Room" (season 4, episode 12), "Ready or Not" (season 4, episode 18), and "Ill Tidings" (season 5, episode 6).

character is used to bypass the need to have other characters search for the answer to this aspect of the story because the autistic character can do it immediately, much like a machine could. It is likely that a large reason as to why there are so few labeled characters in this genre is because of the ease of leaving them unlabeled. Without the diagnosis, there is no baggage in trying to depict certain aspects of autism authentically and there is still the ability to have a character who is able to provide facts and solutions to close a case quickly and tie off the episode in a timely fashion. While this is not necessarily something specific only to the crime genre, it is worth taking note of because these characters are often a very key part in the solving of problems within nearly all the episodes they appear in.

The Family Drama

In the family drama genre, autistic characters were rarely seen between 2007 and 2017 and only one was consistently discussed by those with autism: Max Braverman of *Parenthood* (NBC, 2010-2015). Outside of *Parenthood*, no other series in this genre had a character that was continuously discussed as being somewhere on the spectrum. The reason there was only one character is mainly that Max is the only character that is talked about often within the community because the character has been so well received. A character like Max may not appear often in family dramas due to the weight of having an autistic character and due to the fact that depicting this type of family dynamic can be difficult. This character is seen by many as one of the most researched and best written characters with Asperger's on television.⁶⁵ The series follows multiple members of the Braverman family including Max and his family as they deal with his diagnosis during the series' pilot, when he is eight years old, all the way until the series ends and Max is a teenager.

⁶⁵ Sarah Kurchak, "Television on the Spectrum: The Best (and Worst) Depictions of Asperger Syndrome on TV," *Flavorwire.com*, <http://flavorwire.com/405314/television-on-the-spectrum-the-best-and-worst-depictions-of-asperger-syndrome-on-tv>.

When it came to Max's portrayal, the series did more work to *show* autism rather than just telling viewers about it. Doing this opens the door for viewers to gain a greater understanding of autism and is very likely one of the reasons that the series is seen so positively. In one scene, Max has a tantrum after being bullied during a school field trip. During the car ride home, he asks his parents why the other kids hate him and if it has to do with him being weird. Max also says that he knows that having Asperger's means he is supposed to be smarter, so he does not understand why he is not smart enough to understand why he is being bullied.⁶⁶ Often, those on the spectrum or considered to be are shown as being unaware of how they are socially awkward. Max is not unaware of his awkwardness but he is unaware of how others are seeing him. This highlights that Max is intelligent and able to understand certain things that are occurring around him. It also highlights how he, like many on the spectrum, does not fully grasp the emotional/social cues that those not on the spectrum put out.

In the time frame I looked at from 2007 to 2017, Max Braverman stands out as one of the only well-executed depictions of autism. This most likely comes from the work that went into creating the character off screen. Creator Jason Katims decided to bring the character to life because he felt that having a character like Max and his family was important for others to see. Katims based much of the daily struggles Max and his family face on his experience raising his own son who has autism. On top of this, the actor playing Max, Max Burkholder, did research and consulted with many people regularly to ensure the role was approached in an authentic manner.⁶⁷ One major positive in having autism played out in this family drama genre is that Max is not relied on for any sort of special abilities that have been associated with autism spectrum disorders in the past. If his character were placed within the crime genre during the same time

⁶⁶ "The Offer." *Parenthood*, season 5, episode 18, NBC, 20 March. 2014.

⁶⁷ Jason Katims, "Emmys 2012: 'Parenthood' EP Jason Katims on Why Teen Actor Max Burkholder Deserves an Emmy." *The Hollywood Reporter*, www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/jason-katims-emmys-parenthood-max-burkholder-334239.

period as *Parenthood*, it is likely that he may not have been labeled. It is also likely that his traits that align with autism would be used in solving crimes and making him more of an oddball character. In this genre, it is about Max and his family living with autism and how they handle certain situations. In this genre, Max gets to be a well-rounded character that shows growth as well as some aspects of the autism spectrum rather than being placed in the story to serve as a plot device for others.

Children's Shows

In children's shows, there is often not much clarity about potentially autistic characters. However, the two characters in the genre of children's shows that stand out to many within the autism community are *Sesame Street's* (PBS and HBO, 1969-present) Julia and *Girl Meets World's* (Disney Channel, 2014-2017) Isadora Smackle. It is important to note that both of these characters have made appearances since 2015, which is also a time period where the discussion around autism has increased as diagnoses rise. Isadora Smackle was a limited-appearance character that was in an episode centering on whether or not another character, Farkle, has autism. Ultimately, it is found that he does not, but by the end of the episode Isadora reveals her own diagnosis on the spectrum.⁶⁸

What is significant to the episode is that while the common traits of social awkwardness and high intelligence are present, it is the friendships these characters have that are important. The entire episode sees the group of friends supporting Farkle, even going so far as to do research on the Asperger's in case he is diagnosed. Farkle and Smackle's friends being accepting of who they are, autism or not, is not a commonly played story on television. In the creation of the episode, the show and Disney in particular approached it as providing an opportunity for both entertainment and education. Disney made sure to have three different consultants for the

⁶⁸ "Girl Meets Farkle." *Girl Meets World*, season 2, episode 15, Disney Channel, 11 Sept. 2015.

episode and wanted to make sure that the topic was one that parents and their children could have a discussion about.⁶⁹ Showing this acceptance of autistic characters in a children's show allows for the child viewers to also be accepting of these characters and potentially of autism in general.

Sesame Street's puppet Julia was first introduced on television in April of 2017 but had been a character in digital format since 2015. Julia was first introduced as a part of an autism awareness initiative from *Sesame Street*. When Julia first appears on screen, she is very focused on painting and misses Big Bird saying hello. When Big Bird does not understand and thinks Julia is rude, it is explained that she has autism and may do things a little differently. As the scene progresses, autism is explained a bit more to Big Bird by Alan, an adult frequently seen on the series, with the point being made to describe what autism is like for Julia. When Julia starts bouncing after a game of tag is suggested, the other kids adapt the game to Julia and create what they call "boing tag" so they can all hop and play together.⁷⁰ Here *Sesame Street* does a good job of noting that each individual with autism can experience it differently, following the saying "If you know one person with autism, you know one person with autism."

Much like *Parenthood's* Max Braverman, Julia's character was greatly researched. Julia has repetitive movements, hyper focus, and social awkwardness. *Sesame Street* had started to work with educators, activists, and psychologists to create an autism initiative in 2010. Eventually *Sesame Street* had their magazine editor, who was the parent of an autistic child, start writing a book with an autistic character, which became Julia. Not long after the book was released, the writers, artists, puppeteers, and actors spent months working to bring Julia to screen. Puppeteer Stacey Gordon has a son on the spectrum, designer Louis Mitchell worked

⁶⁹ "Disney Channel's 'Girl Meets World' Episode to Focus on Autism." *Autism Speaks*, www.autismspeaks.org/news/news-item/disney-channel039s-quotgirl-meets-worldquot-episode-focus-autism.

⁷⁰ "Meet Julia." *Sesame Street*, season 47, episode 15, 10 April. 2017

with autistic children in schools, and scriptwriter Christine Ferraro had a sibling on the spectrum.⁷¹ The significance of all of this is that as there is greater awareness in society regarding autism, there is greater work going on in some cases like this to broaden the depictions of autism.

Both of the children's series in this section were those that have consistently worked toward inclusion. With *Girl Meets World*, the series tackled many obstacles that children and their families may face in daily life including divorce, friendship, and general issues of growing up. *Sesame Street* has always been a show about providing learning opportunities to children and their parents. With the numbers of autism diagnoses in children rising over the years, it makes sense to start including more characters on the spectrum. Many children who are on the spectrum experience bullying and isolation. In the year following Julia's appearance, some studies found that there was an increase in the awareness and acceptance of autism among parents and children without autistic family members.⁷² A character like Julia, Farkle, or Isadora Smackle being on these shows that are geared toward children allows for those on the spectrum to have representations but also for those not on the spectrum to gain an awareness and start a conversation.

Medical Dramas

While the crime genre may have had the most instances of characters on screen who appeared to have autism, the medical drama has more that are clearly labeled as autistic. Within this genre, the characters who are shown to be patients are often labeled and on what would be considered the lower end of the spectrum. Those that are doctors tend to do poorly in social skills so they appear to be cold with their patients and colleagues. The label gives the opportunity to

⁷¹ Ron Suskind, "Why the Team Behind Sesame Street Created a Character With Autism," *Smithsonian.com*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/team-sesame-street-created-character-autism-180967218/>.

⁷² Rebecca Dube, "How Sesame Street Is Changing the World for People with Autism." *TODAY.com*, www.today.com/parents/sesame-street-s-muppet-autism-julia-makes-impact-t127450.

have a more interesting medical case when the autistic character is a patient. When the autistic character is a doctor, the programs have a way to explore behaviors that might seem abnormal or problematic for a medical professional. In this genre, I looked at four characters: Dr. Isidore Latham in *Chicago Med* (NBC, 2015-present), Adam in the episode of *House* (FOX, 2004-2012) “Lines in the Sand,” Dr. Virginia Dixon in *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-present), and the family of an autistic patient in *Private Practice* (ABC, 2007-2013). It is very likely that there are many more cases of autism in this genre but the ones I have viewed were the standout ones. All four of these characters were openly diagnosed with autism. What is interesting is that all but *Chicago Med*’s Dr. Isidore Latham are only limited-appearance characters. With Dr. Latham, the arc that the character has had since the second season of the series (2016-17), the show returns for a fourth season in fall 2018) is very different from the usual portrayal of autism.

Typically, a medical series will have the openly autistic character as the patient and that character will appear once in the series. Often, the character with autism is depicted as a patient who either has little to no verbal skills and behavioral issues. This leads to the doctors struggling at first in communicating with and diagnosing the patient. If the character is a doctor, they are often a genius and socially aloof. Dr. Latham is a talented cardiac surgeon who is a recurring character and has an important role within the story. This character has the traits of lacking emotion but having literal thoughts and high intellect. When he is first introduced in the series, he is seen as rude and cold by patients and colleagues, telling new colleague Dr. Connor Rhodes that he does not want Rhodes as his resident and feels that others would be better suited. Not long after this introduction and some tension between Latham and his colleagues, the series shows Latham being diagnosed as autistic. In following episodes, Latham is seen working on how he interacts with colleagues and on trying to understand emotions of others.

The way that Dr. Latham is portrayed is unique in a number of ways but also has its flaws. The first is that he is black, which is rarely, if ever, seen on screen when it comes to autism. He is also someone who has been diagnosed as an adult, which poses a different kind of learning curve for the character. Dr. Latham is often shown in the ER during major traumas with the reasoning coming back to his emotional detachment from the situation. This allows him to sort patients into who can and cannot be saved so that the doctors are working as efficiently as possible in these high trauma events. Rhodes is shown at the end of the episode telling Latham he envies that ability to only see those situations logically rather than emotionally.⁷³ On one hand, Latham's emotional distance can be seen as good in that it allows him to clearly help his patients. However, the show misses out on opportunities to show that Latham does very likely have emotions but does not show them in a typical fashion because emotions can sometimes be difficult for someone with autism to understand. Dr. Latham's personal life is rarely seen on screen and he is the only character that has behaviors that stand out as odd in comparison to others on screen.

Dr. Virginia Dixon is a character that appeared in just three episodes of *Grey's Anatomy*⁷⁴ as a potential new chief of cardiothoracic surgery. Dr. Dixon is portrayed in somewhat stereotypical ways in that she is an extremely skilled surgeon but she also hates physical touch, makes no eye contact, has no emotional abilities, and lacks a filter. When she is first introduced in the series, the chief of surgery refers to her as being "a little off" and equates the hospital's recent roof collapse to her autism, implying that her diagnosis is a hindrance. The series seems to have tried to be inclusive but fell into nearly every stereotype except for the fact that Dr. Dixon is a woman. Her skill as a surgeon was often downplayed by colleagues because they saw her

⁷³ "Cold Front." *Chicago Med*, season 2, episode 14, NBC, 16 Feb. 2017.

⁷⁴ She appeared in two episodes in 2008 and one in 2009 before leaving the series.

autism as a problem rather than seeing her immense skill and ability to save lives. With this character, one reason she may not have lasted on the show as long as others is because of the nature of the series itself. The series tends to be based on the personal lives of the characters and bringing in Dr. Dixon as a main or even recurring character in that setting may have been too daunting of a task for the series to take on. This may have been daunting in part based on the year in which the character appeared. She was on the series in 2008-2009 which was a time where autism was still viewed with more concern than understanding. Bringing that to screen and trying to tackle the everyday life of Dr. Dixon could have been something that the program shied from due to the lack of understanding.

The interesting connection between *Chicago Med's* Dr. Latham and *Grey's Anatomy's* Dr. Dixon is in their field: cardiac surgery. It is significant that both work with the human heart. One key aspect of autism that tends to come out on screen is the perceived lack of emotions autistic people show. One common stereotype tied to this is the equation of autistic people with machines. These representations subtly challenge that stereotype in that the two doctors are both autistic and work on the heart, an organ often equated with emotions. The characters from *Private Practice* and *House* that I briefly viewed were both male children who were mainly nonverbal. They were openly diagnosed but also showed some other aspects of the spectrum that other television shows and genres do not always tackle. With the medical drama, there seems to be a greater ability to provide more depth to some depictions of autism on screen. This is one of the few places that one may see someone who is on the spectrum who is nonverbal and/or exhibits more aggressive behavioral issues.

The Sitcom

With the sitcom genre, I looked at five characters: Abed Nadir in *Community* (NBC and Yahoo! Screen, 2009-2015), Brick Heck in *The Middle* (ABC, 2009-2018), Dr. Sheldon Cooper

and Dr. Amy Farrah-Fowler in *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-present), and Tina Belcher in *Bob's Burgers* (FOX, 2011-present). Although each of these characters is viewed as autistic by the autism community and by some viewers outside of this community, none of the five are diagnosed on screen as having an autism spectrum disorder. All of these characters are socially awkward, have quirky personalities, and seem to have issues with expressing and understanding emotions. Within the comedy genre, these traits are often used as a part of the punchline to generate more laughs out of the audience. Both characters on *The Big Bang Theory* share the traits of high intellect as well. The two characters of most interest by the autism community in this genre are Abed Nadir and Sheldon Cooper. This is because both are widely discussed as having traits that indicate autism but they are each viewed differently by the autism community.

Sheldon Cooper has poor social skills, obsessive interests, dislikes change, and has an aversion to touch. His socially awkward nature and obsessive tendencies, such as knocking on doors three times while shouting the person's name each time, are often used for the audience to laugh at Sheldon. His behavioral traits are set up to be humorous in an almost mocking way, especially considering that the character is never let in on the joke. Sheldon's behavioral traits are often used in making him a part of the punchline. An example of this can be seen throughout the series with Sheldon's spot on the couch. Throughout the series he has offered reasoning as to why the particular seat on the couch is so special, which often leads to audience laughter or mocking. In one specific instance, he is arguing with a friend who then rubs his bare bottom across the cushion to upset Sheldon.⁷⁵ Rather than feeling for Sheldon or at least understanding why that would be upsetting, the audience is set up to laugh at the situation.

Community's Abed is a character that has had positive reactions among the autistic community even though he is not openly diagnosed in the series. Abed is a nerd but he is also

⁷⁵ "The Parking Spot Escalation." *The Big Bang Theory*, season 6, episode 9, CBS, 29 Nov. 2012.

complex and not left as the punchline of the jokes. Within the pilot episode, there are moments in which others suggest that Abed has Asperger's. Although never confirmed, his traits are those that many both on and off screen caught onto. In some episodes, including the pilot, some characters question if Abed is on the spectrum. One common trait of Asperger's is that the person has narrow interests or obsessions. Abed's are pop culture and he often uses what he has seen in film and television to understand social situations. Through multiple episodes in the series' run, Abed ties situations back to classic *Star Trek* episodes or famous directors⁷⁶ as he tries to understand the world around him. He also misses out on social cues very often, such as in one episode in which he completely misses out on a man at the bar hitting on him. Once he realizes it, he continues to talk to the man about the same thing because that was of more interest to him than the flirting.⁷⁷ Many were able to connect to Abed, even going so far as to contact creator Dan Harmon to discuss the character. Oddly enough, Harmon found out he was actually on the spectrum because of these conversations. Harmon has said that there are aspects of himself in Abed's character.⁷⁸ It is then possible that some of these common traits between creator and character portrayed autism in a more authentic way than originally anticipated simply because Harmon was pulling some of his own personality traits to the character.

Other shows that have appeared since the increase in awareness of autism, like *Bob's Burgers*, have not outwardly labeled their characters as autistic. A series like *Bob's Burgers* or *The Big Bang Theory* (which premiered in 2007) may shy away from a diagnosis because of the nature of their shows. Both are sitcoms and carrying that diagnosis and the pressure of doing so in a somewhat accurate sense can be immense. Creators such as *Big Bang Theory*'s Bill Prady

⁷⁶ "Virtual Systems Analysis." *Community*, season 3, episode 16, NBC, 19 April. 2012.

⁷⁷ "Mixology Certification." *Community*, season 2, episode 10, NBC, 2 Dec. 2010.

⁷⁸ Yohana Desta, "When Hollywood Turns Asperger's Into a Joke." In *Mashable*, <https://mashable.com/2014/05/08/aspergers-tv-movies/#dGXvc.VL5Pqg>.

have shied from diagnosing characters with autism for fear of the show leaving the sitcom realm and becoming too serious.⁷⁹

A (Dis)Honorable Mention

There is one character that I viewed who is worth mentioning for more negative reasons: *Glee*'s (FOX, 2009-2015) Sugar Motta. From her very first appearance on screen in the series, Sugar caused a backlash in the autism community. In these moments, she is openly rude to people and then immediately apologizes. This follows with an introduction in which she states, "I have self-diagnosed Asperger's so I can say whatever I want."⁸⁰ Essentially, the only trait that Sugar shows as being anywhere near those typical of Asperger's is being blunt at times. That she apologizes immediately afterward indicates that she is aware that her bluntness is problematic. Often, those with Asperger's are *unaware* of how being blunt can be a problem at times. While they can be blunt, they generally are not doing so to be openly mean even if it can be misunderstood as such initially. What Sugar seems to do is showcase the problematic trope of people with Asperger's being jerks. The larger issue that many in the autism community had with this character was in the fact that *Glee* never addressed the issue again. It came across as a way of having a character be rude to others in a way that was different from other characters who were blunt about things simply because of who they were. I ultimately wanted to mention Sugar Motta because she is such an oddly-placed character who is genuinely problematic and stands out as a poor example of the ways that autism is represented on screen.

Discussion

The issue with many of these characters is that they tend to fall into the same tropes of autism: quirky, highly intelligent, and socially awkward. Many are of high intellect and the other

⁷⁹ "Do the 'ASD' Characters on Television Adequately Reflect the Reality of Autism?" *Autism Daily Newscast*, <http://autismdailynewscast.com/do-the-asd-characters-on-television-adequately-reflect-the-reality-of-autism/2776/adn/>.

⁸⁰ "The Purple Piano Project." *Glee*, season 3, episode 1, FOX, 20 Sept. 2011.

behavioral traits they share include social awkwardness and holding too much or too little eye contact. Each of these traits are largely part of the way that people identify characters as being on the spectrum. The first issue with this is that because autism has continuously been seen in media with these traits, it has been assumed by many with little experience with autism that these traits are the whole of the condition. While these are traits that a person on the spectrum often has, not all autistic people have these traits and there are other aspects to the condition that many experience, including the possibilities of being nonverbal or exhibiting self-injurious behavior. It is worth noting the potential hurdles faced in having these traits present in characters on television if they are meant to be characters appearing across episodes. Television is a place for viewers to watch and connect with characters across a number of episodes and/or seasons. Showrunners may shy away from having characters who are nonverbal or who display behavioral issues because showcasing the growth of those characters would not be as simple and could also be viewed as something that would not be entertaining for a larger audience.

Another issue with these characters is in the lack of diversity. Many are straight white males. In all of the cases I viewed, every character was straight. There were some that were not white and some that were not male. Characters like Dr. Latham are important to see because he is black and has an autism spectrum disorder. A character like Temperance Brennan or *The Bridge's* Sonya Cross being outwardly labeled as autistic could have been a refreshing change to the usual depiction of autism. It is important to note that these female characters may not have a diagnosis on screen in part because of the fact that the diagnostic criteria for women has only recently been found to be different with autism than it is for men.⁸¹

⁸¹ Jennifer Malia, "I'm Autistic, and *Bones* Is the Only TV Character Like Me, so Why Isn't She Diagnosed?" *Glamour*, www.glamour.com/story/bones-series-finale.

One final aspect to the characters viewed in this chapter that is worth noting is in the time frame that each show was released. Shows like *Criminal Minds* and *Bones* both came out in 2005, which is before instances like increased media attention in 2007 following Jenny McCarthy's stance on autism vaccines and before the changes to diagnostic criteria in 2013. Many series that started before or near these time frames also have characters that are undiagnosed. Meanwhile, a series like *Sesame Street* or *Chicago Med*, one of which has been on for years and the latter of which started in 2015, have openly diagnosed characters that have appeared following these windows in which autism awareness has increased.

When looking at each of these genres, it is worth noting that the only one consistently labeling characters as having an autism spectrum disorder is the medical genre. The reason I find significance here comes back to the medical and social model that I brought up in the first chapter. With the medical model, the focus is on the idea that there is some sort of physical cause for a disability. What is implied with this is that disability can be cured and understood. The social model is about validating the lived experiences of those with disabilities. The reason to bring these models into play here is because for a long time, society has operated under the medical model. This ties back to why there is such fear and worry over autism; the condition does not have a known cause or cure. When one goes to the doctor, there is the expectation of a clear answer about what is wrong with one's body. With the medical genre, the quirky and socially awkward doctor would not work without the diagnosis. The character of Dr. Gregory House, if he were placed on the spectrum, is not socially awkward so much as abrasive. His traits are ultimately deemed to be ok because of his intelligence and ability to save lives. Dr. Latham is not well liked by his staff until they have clarity on why he is seemingly cold. In reality and on screen, doctors and the medical profession as a whole are meant to provide answers and ease worry. This is not something solely placed with the medical genre but it is more prominent in the

depictions of autism in this genre. Over the decade of depictions examined in this chapter and in the depictions of autism in the next, it is clear that there have been changes in the depictions because of changes in awareness of autism.

The social model plays in here in that society is slowly seeming to move closer to that model. As those with disabilities have gained more of a voice through platforms like Twitter or Facebook, the understanding of lived experiences of autism has started to change. Without awareness, the label of autism carried such weight that trying to depict it on screen could be daunting. A character like *Parenthood's* Max Braverman was not commonly seen on screen, especially in the time period where the fear around autism was so high from 2007 to around 2013. As the voices of those on the spectrum are heard more and more, the social model is slowly starting to be the model society turns to.

Conclusion

There are so few characters historically that have shown up on screen and been properly labeled as autistic. This has led to many within the autism community finding characters who have some characteristics of autism and then claiming them as their own. These characters, while not showing much range or being outwardly autistic, are what members of the community connect with in part because it is as close to a representation of themselves as they can get. The issue with the common portrayals of autism is that viewers may generalize these stereotypes as being the only set of traits or behaviors an individual with autism may have. To a degree, this can be seen in many of the characters that are not diagnosed on screen with autism but are perceived as being autistic anyways. Some of these perceptions come from the community and some are from general viewers who, since *Rain Man*, have been fed one type of autism rather than a range.

The larger issue with many of these depictions on television is not in the chosen traits of the characters. In fact, many people with Asperger's syndrome (which has been a part of autism

spectrum disorders since 2013) have normal language development, higher IQs, are project-oriented, and have issues understanding social interactions.⁸² These traits are seen often on screen but it is in the lack of ownership of a diagnosis and in the lack of exploring other parts of autism spectrum disorders where there is an issue. Exposure to autism spectrum disorders can be good in the general sense that it creates awareness within society.

On one hand, leaving a character without a diagnosis can be a wise choice for a TV creator, and for social acceptance of autism. It allows for the character to stand on their own and it allows for the creative teams behind the scenes to work without the extra pressure of attempting to be authentic to a diagnosis, especially something as wide ranging as autism. On the other hand, the lack of labeling and attempting to have an authentic portrayal does not allow for audiences to see and understand what autism spectrum disorders are like. It also does not allow for those with autism spectrum disorders to have some sense of representation on screen in a character who is clearly meant to represent them. Those that are unlabeled are picked up/viewed on the spectrum because there has been so little labeling on screen and because of stereotypes. What is important is having some form of portrayal that is thoughtful and starts a dialogue. What media, in this case television, needs to do is start creating shows that steer away from stereotypes in order to give society the opportunity to have a better understanding of autism rather than just an awareness of it. In my next chapter, I will discuss shows like *The Good Doctor* and *Atypical* and how they both show aspects of autism that have not been seen in mainstream media often.

⁸² Maggie Furlong, "The Latest Trend On TV: Characters With Asperger's." in *The Huffington Post*, www.huffingtonpost.com/maggie-furlong/aspergers-on-tv_b_3574336.html.

III: Fall of 2017: The Year of Autism on Television

Since 2007 there have been gradual changes to the depictions of autism on screen. While there are many similar tropes to past depictions in terms of fears of the unknown or foci on the special talents of autistic characters, a change is beginning to be seen on screen. The focus of this chapter turns to more recent US based shows *The Good Doctor* and *Atypical*. Both of these shows premiered in the fall of 2017 and have main characters with autism. Not only do these characters have autism but the story is about them and who they are as individuals rather than as plot devices. In this chapter, I discuss the way autism is depicted through these characters and how other characters interact with them. I also look at what is different than past depictions and what replicates stereotypes in the depictions of autism for each of these shows. This includes looking at the usual traits of being socially awkward or newer traits like those of having sexual drive or expressing emotions. What is starting to be seen in television is an inclusion of people on the spectrum in new ways, providing greater development and representation on screen.

The Good Doctor

ABC's *The Good Doctor* premiered in late September 2017. The medical drama is centered around Dr. Shaun Murphy, a gifted surgeon who has both autism and savant syndrome. By the third episode of the first season, the series was the most watched television show of that season in the United States. The series has supporting characters that are crucial to Shaun's development because some take on the role of trying to understand and help him while others are trying to work against his placement within the hospital. What I have done to analyze this series is to look at it from three different of perspectives: how Shaun's autism is handled, how other characters deal with Shaun, and how the production of the series and its reception by audiences also shape its representation of autism. Looking at these areas will help in finding what changes have and have not been made over time in depictions of autism. While I viewed all 18 episodes

of the first season, I will focus on a few episodes with important scenes. The most important of the episodes I will address is the first, “Pilot” episode because of the foundation it sets up for Shaun and the supporting cast.

I first want to discuss the character of Dr. Shaun Murphy and how autism is depicted through this character. To do this, I have looked at certain character traits Shaun has consistently shown and found key scenes that depict those traits. In the past, autism on television would usually come with a certain set of behaviors that were present whether the character was clearly labeled as autistic or not. These behaviors include poor social skills, issues with eye contact, aversion to change, and repetitive behaviors. Examples of this in the past have included instances such as Spencer Reid in the ongoing CBS series *Criminal Minds* disliking the switch from paper to tablets for cases⁸³ or Sonya Cross in FX’s 2013 TV series *The Bridge* changing her clothes in the middle of the precinct.⁸⁴ While Shaun has some of these traits, some are different from what is usually on screen. Shaun also exhibits behaviors that show he is autistic but do so in a way that is different from what some viewers are used to seeing.

A clear difference in the portrayal of Shaun is in his empathy and emotions, which can be seen throughout parts of the series, especially in the Pilot. What makes this aspect of the representation different is that autistic people are very often shown to lack empathy and to either have no emotions or to have extreme difficulty with emotions. In *Chicago Med*, Dr. Latham is given an entire story arc in season two (2016-2017) regarding how he does not understand the emotions of others and how he does not express them himself. Shaun does at times have issues with expressing his emotions but that does not mean he is lacking in emotion. In the Pilot episode, it is Shaun’s ability to express emotions on some level that helps to get him his job in

⁸³ “Middle Man.” *Criminal Minds*, season 6, episode 7, CBS, 3 Nov. 2010.

⁸⁴ “Pilot.” *The Bridge*, season 1, episode 1, FX, 10 July. 2013.

the hospital as well as getting the audience to connect to him. Throughout this first episode, flashbacks show Shaun with both his childhood pet rabbit and his brother. In these flashbacks, the audience is able to also witness the loss Shaun experiences after his rabbit is killed and his brother dies in an accident. At the end of the episode, Shaun is asked why he wants to be a doctor. This is where his empathy can be seen. After a pause, Shaun tells the board of directors that his rabbit and his brother died and never got to grow up and have families:

The day that the rain smelled like ice cream, my bunny went to heaven in front of my eyes. The day that the copper pipes in the old building smelled like burnt food, my brother... went to heaven in front of my eyes. I couldn't save them. It's sad. Neither one had the chance to become an adult. They should have become adults. They should have had children of their own and loved those children. And I want to make that possible for other people.⁸⁵

Showing Shaun's emotions not only provides character depth but also allow for the audience to see that Shaun and others on the spectrum do have emotions; they just might experience these emotions differently than would someone with a neurotypical mind.

A neurotypical character might show emotion and the viewer would not question those emotions in the same way. Shaun's emotions in this scene are shown in his pause before answering, his slight rocking and wringing of his hands, and his slightly tear-filled eyes. All of this is seen through a shot that has Shaun in the center, from the waist up. The audience sees his eyes fill with tears and his hands wringing together in front of his stomach. Shaun's physical actions are crucial because his speech tends to be monotone. Emotions do not often come forward in his tone of voice, which is a typical trait with autism. The writers and actor Freddie Highmore help to draw the audience to Shaun's movements and physical cues in order to understand him. In these scenes, the camera is focused on his hands or his eyes. This helps the audience to see how Shaun's emotions play out rather than simply hearing them in his tone of

⁸⁵ "Burnt Food." *The Good Doctor*, season 1, episode 1, ABC, 25 Sept. 2017.

voice. An autistic character is rarely, if ever, portrayed as having emotions and when they do, it is difficult to see. Shaun is shown to have emotions even though he displays them differently than what we may be accustomed to. Providing the audience with a way to understand how Shaun feels and expresses his emotions is crucial to encouraging them to connect with him. The audience needs to understand and have empathy for Shaun in order to care about him and the series works hard to make this happen.

An aspect of autism that is not often discussed onscreen is sexual drive. Usually, autistic people are shown in media as lacking any sort of sexual drive because they are often seen or believed to be asexual. Spencer Reid in *Criminal Minds* is an example of this. Through the entire series so far (2005 to present) he has had only one brief moment where he was interested in a romantic relationship. While that may be true for some autistic people, it is not true for all autistic people. In the fourth episode of *The Good Doctor*, Shaun reveals that he has watched porn before and even mentions his observations about how some porn has storylines and some does not. At one point in the episode, Shaun is so wrapped up in remembering his first time viewing porn, he misses his bus. The significance in showing that people on the spectrum have sexual drives is in the fact that it changes the perceptions of others who are not on the spectrum. While a person on the spectrum may be asexual, the reason a person on the spectrum is not in a relationship may have more to do with issues in their social skills than their sexual drive.⁸⁶

Shaun is also shown to have an attraction to his neighbor Lea. Through the first half of the series, she is a friend who is not associated with the hospital and she shows him there is more in the world than medicine. Midway through the first season, Shaun goes on a road trip with Lea.⁸⁷ On this trip, Shaun experiences some firsts, including getting drunk, doing karaoke, and

⁸⁶ Eunjung Kim, "Asexuality in Disability Narratives." *Sexualities*, 14, no. 4, (2011): 479–493, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711406463>.

⁸⁷ "Islands: Part One." *The Good Doctor*, season 1, episode 11, ABC, 8 Jan. 2017.

his first kiss. Not long after this kiss with Lea, she reveals she is moving away. Shaun does not handle it well and runs off. In this sequence of events, the series showcases how Shaun can be attracted to someone even though he is on the spectrum. On one hand, it has shown that Shaun and other people on the spectrum can and do have attractions to others. It demonstrates that while anyone can experience heartbreak, it is different for Shaun. Shaun has emotions like neurotypicals do but he expresses them differently. The series gives Shaun a moment to be in a romantic relationship of sorts while also showing how he is not entirely ready for that because he still has some issues in expressing his emotions. What will be interesting to see is how their dynamic plays out in the second season because the actress playing Lea has been added in as a series regular.⁸⁸ On one hand, the show could move Lea into the position of friend or acquaintance to Shaun, which would be a regression in depiction because autism is often associated with asexuality. On the other hand, they could bring her back as a continued love interest to Shaun which would further the series' attempt to break from stereotypes of autism.

Shaun at times behaves in ways that are seen as socially acceptable and at times in ways that are not. He responds to events around him and according to his emotional state. As a way of coping, Shaun can often be seen ringing his hands together or over a hand towel when he is upset. These moments are shown in shots of Shaun often from the waist up with his hands being the place we are drawn, especially when there are not clear emotions played in his face. Shaun is often seen performing actions like this when he is agitated or thinking. In flashbacks, Shaun is shown to have coped in different ways. This included rocking back and forth and even, after the death of his brother, lashing out on occasion.⁸⁹ Although it is not seen on screen, the shift from

⁸⁸ Kristen Baldwin, "The Good Doctor' Star Freddie Highmore on Leah and Shaun's 'Exciting' Future." In *Entertainment Weekly*, <https://ew.com/tv/2018/06/04/the-good-doctor-freddie-highmore/>.

⁸⁹ "Oliver." *The Good Doctor*, season 1, episode 3, ABC, 9 Oct. 2017.

Shaun lashing to simply wringing his hands indicates that he has changed his behaviors over time. This implies that as Shaun has progressed in life, his coping mechanisms have as well.

Shaun is also shown having different sensory responses than one may traditionally think would occur for a person on the spectrum. Often, if a character is autistic or seen as such, they have sensory issues. The audience generally sees these through the autistic character having issues with bright lights or loud sounds. In the episode of *House* I viewed, the patient Adam is on the spectrum and becomes overwhelmed by the bright lights and medical equipment at moments in the episode.⁹⁰ Spencer Reid is another strong example as he can be seen in some episodes having issues with bright lights.⁹¹ Many of Shaun's flashbacks are triggered through specific visual or auditory events. In one instance, Shaun sees the flashing lights of a police car and he is taken back to the day his brother died and the resulting moments with the officers.⁹²

One important difference from the usual depiction of sensory issues with autistic characters can be seen in an early episode where Shaun and Dr. Claire Brown are going to take a helicopter to receive an organ for transplant.⁹³ Initially, she worries he will be upset by the noise of the helicopter. Shaun tells her that he is OK with the helicopter noise because he is fascinated by how they work. He does not have any sort of sensory overload because he is aware of the noise the helicopter will make and is interested in the machinery. Dr. Brown seems to be portrayed as having the usual response and worries regarding potential sensory issues of people with autism. The show then flips this and shows that Shaun has different responses to certain things that may be upsetting for others on the spectrum. Shaun is represented as being triggered more by what he can and cannot understand than by sounds or visuals alone. What is being shown here is that each individual on the spectrum has different behavioral traits and responds to

⁹⁰ "Lines in the Sand." *House*, season 3, episode 4, FOX, 26 Sept. 2006.

⁹¹ "Corazon." *Criminal Minds*, season 6, episode 12, CBS, 11 Jan. 2011.

⁹² "Oliver." *The Good Doctor*, season 1, episode 3, ABC, 9 Oct. 2017.

⁹³ "Ibid.

issues and events in their own ways. Shaun's traits/quirks are not compared to anyone in the sense of trying to show him as different. Instead, he is shown to be an individual, which is an expansion of the usual representation of autism in TV.

Outside of Shaun's interactions with his neighbor Lea, there are three characters that Shaun is around often: Dr. Neil Melendez, Dr. Claire Brown, and Dr. Aaron Glassman. These three are not the only people Shaun interacts with but all three serve different purposes in his daily life. Dr. Melendez is Shaun's boss and is somewhat of an antagonist to Shaun. Melendez looks at Shaun differently than Brown and Glassman do. He looks at Shaun and sees that while Shaun can and has saved lives because of his ability to view things differently, he could also kill a patient because of his autism. In the Pilot, once Shaun is hired, Melendez makes a point of telling Shaun that he will never do anything more than suctioning while in surgery. In the second episode, Melendez leaves Shaun doing grunt work and tells Glassman that it is to prove that Shaun does not belong in the hospital. Shaun spends the episode not only doing grunt work but also communicating oddly with patients.⁹⁴ He says too much or lacks the ability to reassure them at times, none of which goes over well with Melendez. Melendez serves the role of skeptic in this series. While others are willing to give Shaun a chance because his brilliance as a doctor has outshined his diagnosis, Melendez does not see that. He feels that since Shaun cannot effectively communicate with patients and colleagues, that he is not suited for the job. Melendez is a character used to get the audience to sympathize more with Shaun. He represents the way some people may view others who are on the spectrum and resembles the prejudiced ideas some people have about autism. Contrasting him is Shaun, who is continuously proving those assumptions wrong.

⁹⁴ "Mount Rushmore," *The Good Doctor*, season 1, episode 2, ABC, 2 Oct. 2017.

Dr. Claire Brown is a young doctor working under Dr. Melendez in the hospital who slowly works to understand Shaun. In the Pilot, she initially dismisses him when he tries to provide a diagnosis to a trauma patient. Through the season, she works on communicating with Shaun and understanding what Shaun is seeing. In the episode with the organ transplant, she gets upset when she cannot get Shaun to answer her questions. Eventually she realizes that Shaun does not like being asked questions, so she begins to adapt how she discusses certain things with him. The significance is that she is taking the time to understand Shaun and work to interact with him in ways that are comfortable for him. She is showing the audience that Shaun is not difficult to communicate with; it just takes a different approach than what she is accustomed to. In much of the third episode, the story is driven by Claire's attempts to understand Shaun.⁹⁵ This carries on throughout the first season. As Claire understand more about Shaun and how he processes things, so does the audience.

Of all the relationships Shaun has in his life, the one he has with Dr. Aaron Glassman is the most significant. Glassman and Shaun met after Shaun's rabbit was killed and then again after Shaun's brother died. From then on, Glassman was Shaun's mentor. Glassman is the head of the hospital and is the one who pushed the board to give Shaun a chance. In the Pilot episode, he makes an impassioned speech about accepting limitations and letting people like Shaun work in the hospital because he is gifted in spite of his diagnosis. Glassman serves a role similar to that of a parent or advocate who is fighting for inclusion and acceptance of autism in these moments. It is Glassman who Dr. Brown consults when she needs help communicating with Shawn. It is also Glassman who Shaun calls when in need.

In the fourth episode of the series, Shaun is distraught over a leaking faucet in his apartment. When he begins to panic because he cannot find his screwdriver to fix the leak, he

⁹⁵ "Oliver," *The Good Doctor*, season 1, episode 3, ABC, 9 Oct. 2017

calls Glassman. It is the middle of the night, and Glassman gets frustrated and yells at Shaun. Shaun is visibly taken aback and throws his arms up. This results in Glassman apologizing, calming the situation, and finding the screwdriver. While Glassman is who Shaun goes to in times of need, he is also somewhat overbearing at times.⁹⁶ This leads to an episode where, when overwhelmed with everything, Shaun lashes out and hits Glassman before running away.⁹⁷ The importance of Glassman to the narrative and its representation of autism is that he is not only a supporter of Shaun but also serves to show that sometimes there are moments with Shaun that are not only about his abilities as a doctor and that Shaun can be overwhelmed. Autism is not portrayed here as some super power type of trait that makes Shaun better than everyone else. It is shown to be a part of him that helps him see situations differently but also something that can hinder him in some instances. A depiction like this not only represents people on the spectrum but also gives society a different view and sense of awareness of autism. Showing the range of the condition and having Shaun have moments of being overwhelmed or lashing out does this.

There are also ways in which Shaun is characterized stereotypically. Like many depictions of autistic people on screen, he is a straight, white male. He also falls into the very common trope of having savantism. This diagnosis with savant syndrome is a large issue within the autism community. Autistic characters are most commonly portrayed as savants because it allows for an easy answer to a problem in the story without the baggage a label of autism can carry. Being a part of the medical genre makes the savant character trait work better in the sense of being able to problem solve more quickly on screen. *Chicago Med's* Dr. Latham is very often seen on screen making a quick diagnosis or quickly backing up the diagnosis of a colleague. Dr. Latham's quick thinking and problem solving has only been shown in a hospital setting and

⁹⁶ "Pipes," *The Good Doctor*, season 1, episode 4, ABC, 16 Oct. 2017.

⁹⁷ "Sacrifice," *The Good Doctor*, season 1, episode 10, ABC, 4 Dec. 2017.

never in his personal life on screen. Shaun's great memory skills and high intellect are used at times to help in diagnosing a patient, sometimes doing so quicker than doctors with more experience and then the medical machines in use. While the series overall does not use Shaun's savantism to further other characters and their development over his own, there is still a large focus on his special gifts/talents. The special skills Shaun has in terms of memory and medical knowledge are used for his own gain. A comparison to this would be the use of Dr. Latham's issues with expressing emotions being used to direct trauma situations because he does not get caught up in feeling bad about a decision. There are also moments in which Shaun's issues in social interactions could be perceived as exaggerated. Some have noted that for Shaun to get to this point in his medical career, he would have had to learn bedside manner to some degree.⁹⁸

One way the show creators helped audiences to connect with Shaun was in having graphics on the screen to show how Shaun was seeing medical issues and making diagnoses. In each episode, while trying to figure out a difficult diagnosis, Shaun's thought process is on screen visually for the viewer, with images of organs and medical definitions. The audience not only views how Shaun thinks but is a part of the diagnosis Shaun makes. Often, a character on another show, especially a medical one, would have a long speech explaining a condition and the diagnosis. In *House* and *Chicago Med*, doctors often list what is wrong with a patient in a monologue given in medical and/or layman's terms. It is an explanation for both the patient and the viewer. With *The Good Doctor*, the audience is given the opportunity to understand how Shaun views an issue. The only way for the audience to see his process is through these graphics. The graphics allow the audience to see how Shaun uses his immense medical knowledge to find and potentially solve a problem more quickly than others. On top of these graphics allowing

⁹⁸ Sarah Bradley, "TV Is Obsessed With an Unrealistic Portrayal of Autistic People." *Tonic*, https://tonic.vice.com/en_us/article/j5j8zb/tv-is-obsessed-with-unrealistic-portrayal-of-autistic-people.

audiences to understand Shaun's mind, a character like Claire helps the audience connect with him. She is set up to be sympathetic and understanding. Her patience and willingness to understand Shaun help the audience to not only be accepting of him but to see his quirks as a part of who he is rather than as a sort of oddity.

The work that went into bringing *The Good Doctor* to television from behind the camera is important to look at. In developing the series, showrunner David Shore, the writers, and actor Freddie Highmore, who plays Dr. Shaun Murphy, all worked with people on the spectrum and with doctors who specialize in autism spectrum disorders in creating the series and the character. David Shore made sure to educate himself on autism spectrum disorders and noted in an interview that he was aware of potential issues in having Shaun have savant syndrome due to it not being common among people with autism.⁹⁹ Shore also was not afraid of tackling autism like some other creators have been in the past. He does not see it as a burden because he feels that the condition being part of a spectrum allows for more license in how they formed the character.¹⁰⁰ His goal was to steer away from stereotypes as much as possible. For him, Shaun was a specific character that was not created to represent autism; he is meant to represent Dr. Shaun Murphy. Ultimately, Shore hopes that the series will allow for people to question the notion of what it means to be qualified for something and to be open to deviations from the norm.¹⁰¹

The show itself has had some mixed reactions from people in the autism community. Much of the general audience response has been positive, with them enjoying the sentimental aspects of the series.¹⁰² Within the autism community some have felt that the show is another

⁹⁹ Hanh Nguyen, "'The Good Doctor' Boss Defends the Show's Sentimental Tone: There's an 'Honest, Unabashed Emotionality' to It," *IndieWire*, <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/10/the-good-doctor-abc-david-shore-daniel-dae-kim-freddie-highmore-1201883366/>.

¹⁰⁰ John Jurgensen, "How 'The Good Doctor' Redefines the TV Hero," *The Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-the-good-doctor-redefines-the-tv-hero-1510401603>.

¹⁰¹ Nguyen, "The Good Doctor Boss'..."

¹⁰² Mike Hirsch, "Why Critics Hate, Viewers Adore ABC's 'The Good Doctor'." In *Themorningcall.com*, <http://www.mcall.com/entertainment/tv-watchers/mc-ent-good-doctor-abc-critics-20171012-story.html>.

failure in showing the broader aspects of autism spectrum disorders because it does not show people who are nonverbal or have behavioral issues. Others see aspects of themselves in Shaun and welcome his presence on television.¹⁰³ Regardless of the stance, the conversation about increased depictions of the range of autism spectrum disorders has started.

In this series, the audience and the characters around Shaun do not have the constant question of whether or not Shaun is on the spectrum. Instead, the series focuses on how to work with the fact that he is and how others approach that fact. Sometimes, within the medical world, both on and off screen, people can be treated as a set of symptoms rather than as an individual. With this series, that is not the case for Shaun. He has been set up to be an individual character. He has his own motivations for what he does. He has skills while also having some flaws. Some of his positive and negative traits are shown to be a part of his autism rather than a result of it. What this series does best is attempt to provide an individualized character that the audience can connect with because of who he is on screen rather than how he is diagnosed.

Atypical

Atypical is dramedy series on Netflix that was released in August of 2017. The series has since been renewed for a second season which will be out in August of 2018. The series centers on Sam, an 18 year-old high school student who is on the autism spectrum. The first season is about Sam searching for independence and his desire to get a girlfriend. During the first week of it premiering on Netflix, *Atypical* was the streaming service's most searched title.¹⁰⁴ Much like *The Good Doctor*, there are important supporting characters surrounding Sam. Each of these characters plays a different role in Sam's life and how he develops through the season. What

¹⁰³ Rob Owen, "Reactions to ABC's Popular 'The Good Doctor' Vary in Local Autism Community." In *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, <http://www.post-gazette.com/ae/tv-radio/2018/03/21/Reactions-to-ABC-s-The-Good-Doctor-vary-in-local-autism-community/stories/201803220012>.

¹⁰⁴ Jodi Murphy, "Why *Atypical* and *The Good Doctor* Are Both Amazing and Flawed." In *Geek Club Books*, <https://geekclubbooks.com/2017/11/atypical-the-good-doctor/>.

differs from *The Good Doctor* is that Sam's family makes up most of those supporting characters and they have individual stories that run parallel to Sam's story. I have viewed all eight episodes of the first season and have looked at Sam as an individual, the main supporting characters, and the production of the series.

Sam (who is played by Keir Gilchrist) has what some would refer to as high-functioning autism and does not have savant syndrome. Like Shaun Murphy, Sam has traits that are commonly seen with people on the spectrum. These common traits include issues with social skills, repetitive behaviors, and issues with eye contact. Where Sam differs from previous depictions is that these traits he has are shown more consistently and with more detail. Sam also has traits not commonly seen with autism like empathy and romantic/sexual attractions like Shaun Murphy does. Each of these traits are important in showing who Sam is but also in shaping the stories of the people around him. I will be discussing what behavioral traits Sam tends to show which are different from what is generally seen on screen.

Sam shows some of the more common traits one may see in an individual with an autism spectrum disorder. Sam is shown to be very literal, has sensory issues, has issues socially, and enacts repetitive behaviors. One thing that helps to show these traits outside of simply seeing them are Sam's monologues that are a part of every episode. These monologues provide a glimpse into Sam's mind and show that he is aware of his autism. These voice-overs often come in to start and end each episode. They also will come in during some episodes as Sam realizes certain things such as how he hurt Paige's feelings at one point, and the voice-over is used to indicate to the audience that Sam has gained an understanding of why she is hurt by his actions. This gives the viewer a chance to see how Sam's mind works. The viewer gets to understand, from Sam's perspective, how he is understanding certain social situations and how he is learning about things in ways that may be different from others. These voice-overs differ from the

graphics the viewer gets in *The Good Doctor* because the audience here gets to understand even more about Sam's thoughts and his awareness of the world around him. Yet the monologues take on a similar function to the graphics on screen for Shaun Murphy's thought process. They each represent the ways these two characters think and understand the world around them. The goal is in getting the audience to not only connect with them both but to also have a greater understanding of how someone on the spectrum may process things.

The most obvious of Sam's traits that viewers might connect to autism are his issues in social situations. Sam often is seen making people uncomfortable because he tends to say what he is thinking. These moments sit somewhere between comedy and drama but while Sam's actions may be amusing at points, he is not made to be part of the punchline like *The Big Bang Theory*'s Sheldon Cooper tends to be. One such instance is early on when Sam throws his therapist, Julia, off for a moment because he points out that he can see her bra.¹⁰⁵ He also misses most social cues and does not know how to react to certain things. This is clear in one scene where Sam is being picked on and starts rambling about birds. Through this rambling, Sam's monologue plays and he states that he is aware he is being picked on but he does not understand why. This is an instance in which the audience knows that Sam is aware of the bullying through his voice-over, even as he continues to ramble on about birds to the students that are mocking him.¹⁰⁶ If the viewer only sees Sam rambling, they are not aware that he understands the bullying. His internal monologue shows the viewer his awareness of himself and certain aspects of the world around him.

Through many scenes and even in some promotional material, Sam can be seen wearing his noise-cancelling headphones. These headphones are one way that he deals with the

¹⁰⁵ "Antarctica." *Atypical*, season 1, episode 1, Netflix, 11 Aug. 2017.

¹⁰⁶ "A Human Female." *Atypical*, season 1, episode 2, Netflix, 11 Aug. 2017.

surrounding world because he has sensitivities to excessive light and sound. When on his first date, he wears these headphones and, while they help him in the restaurant, they cause him to miss what his date is talking about. Other sensory issues come through in scenes like one after Sam buys new clothes.¹⁰⁷ He often wears the same clothes because he does not like certain textures. In his search for independence, he went shopping with a friend and bought new clothes. At some point while in class, the zippers and buckles on his leather jacket overwhelm him and he jumps up to rip the jacket off and toss it in the trash. These sensory issues have even caused him to be banned from some places after having meltdowns when he was younger. Sam's sensory issues can overwhelm him and it is important for viewers to see that and understand that it is both a normal aspect to his life and not a major issue.

The other major, common trait that Sam has which indicates to viewers that he has autism are his repetitive and obsessive behaviors. This is clear in Sam's love for Antarctica and penguins. Often, Sam uses his knowledge of these things to understand the world around him. These thoughts frame each episode with Sam opening the episode with a monologue that ties his experiences to penguins and Antarctica. In one such instance, he relates getting a girlfriend to science, in that you should observe but you also need to ask questions.¹⁰⁸ In including something like this, it shows that Sam is trying to learn certain social skills and is aware that he needs to ask questions rather than simply watch other people interact. When upset, Sam's phrase that he repeats to calm himself is, "Adelie, chinstrap, emperor, gentoo," which are species of penguin. This phrase is heard often in the series as Sam works to calm down.

These traits of repetitive behaviors, sensory issues, and poor social skills are ones that can be seen as stereotypical of a character with autism. Sam also falls into the stereotype of being a

¹⁰⁷ "Julia Says." *Atypical*, season 1, episode 3, Netflix, 11 Aug. 2017.

¹⁰⁸ "A Nice Neutral Smell." *Atypical*, season 1, episode 4, Netflix, 11 Aug. 2017.

straight, white male with an autism spectrum disorder. However, once one gets past the surface, these traits are drawn out in ways that are not commonly seen on screen. Each of Sam's behaviors is not only continuously shown but also shown to fluctuate throughout the first season. He spends time learning how to react to things socially and even is heard at one point stating in a monologue that he stopped himself from saying something because he knew it would hurt others.¹⁰⁹ *Atypical*, like *The Good Doctor*, also portrays autism in ways that are not typical for media representations. It does this in showing autism in an unfiltered way in brief moments and in showing how the people closest to Sam interact with him.

The series does show Sam doing things like hitting himself when upset which, while a real response for some, is not often seen in characters with autism spectrum disorders on screen. A very clear moment of autism being shown in an unfiltered way is in the season finale. In this episode, Sam has gone to Julia, his therapist, and told her he loves her. She gets upset and yells at him (other events transpired leading to her breakdown here). After this occurs, the audience views the world as Sam does as he starts to panic. As Sam panics, the viewer sees the world through his eyes. The screen is blurry and the lights are oddly bright as he makes it onto the bus. All the sounds he hears around him are louder than they should be and he is spiraling. In these moments, Sam is rocking back and forth, pulling his hair, and hyperventilating. What follows is the bus driver calling Sam's parents to help him. Not only does the audience see Sam become overwhelmed but they also get to see an instance where he is helped to calm down and get home. The only other strong example I have found of a sort of breakdown like this in a TV representation was Max Braverman's in the fifth season of *Parenthood*.¹¹⁰ The great thing about this scene with Sam is that, much like Max's character, by the time this moment occurs on

¹⁰⁹ "The Silencing Properties of Snow." *Atypical*, season 1, episode 8, Netflix, 11 Aug. 2017.

¹¹⁰ "The Offer." *Parenthood*, season 5, episode 18, NBC, 20 March. 2014.

screen, the audience is invested in these characters. The audience does not look at Sam with worry or fear. Instead, they feel for him and look for the issue to be resolved so Sam feels better.

Within the series, there are people that Sam is around often who both influence and are influenced by him and his autism. His girlfriend Paige is an important character to Sam throughout the series. The viewer watches Sam learn that Paige is interested in him and how he reacts to that by making a pros and cons list about her. They also see him learn why it is upsetting for her when she discovers that list.¹¹¹ Paige becomes a part of showing Sam's understanding of empathy and that he does have empathy even if he does not show it well sometimes. This is clear in an overwhelmed moment when he loudly states that he does not want to date Paige anymore while they are out to dinner with Paige's family. Afterwards, Paige is clearly hurt and it is then that Sam states, "People think autistic people don't have empathy, but that's not true. Sometimes I can't tell if someone's upset but, once I know, I feel lots of empathy... maybe even more than neurotypicals."¹¹² This moment leads into Sam doing things like jumping into a pool even though he hates it because Paige's necklace is there and he wants to fix things with her. A quote like the one above is clearly there to drive home to viewers that those on the spectrum are not emotionless and lacking empathy even though it can come across as slightly forced.

The audience gets to watch as Paige and Sam navigate through the relationship. Paige does things like try to teach Sam to talk less about penguins because she claims it is annoying. This is something that Sam eventually tells her he doesn't like because he likes penguins and wants to talk about them.¹¹³ Her learning about Sam's behavioral traits are similar to Sam learning what to say or what not to say and when. In getting back with Paige at the school dance,

¹¹¹ "That's my Sweatshirt." *Atypical*, season 1, episode 5, Netflix, 11 Aug. 2017.

¹¹² "The Silencing Properties of Snow." *Atypical*.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

he uses nature analogies to explain to her how “girlfriend stuff” is hard for him to understand but also that he is sorry for hurting her.¹¹⁴ Another important aspect to Paige’s role is that it shows that even though Sam has autism, he can pursue a romantic relationship, which goes against the usual depiction of autistic people as being asexual.

Sam’s family is another major part of the storyline. In his search for independence, he leaves the rest of the family trying to find who they are and what their place is without Sam as their central focus. Generally, when a family has a child with autism, the family will have schedules and patterns in place to provide a stable routine. The roles of each family member will rarely shift, which is why Sam’s new independence leaves his parents and his sister struggling to figure out where they fit into this new lifestyle. Each of them has revolved their life around what Sam needs. According to his father, his mother has given up her personal life and part of herself to take care of Sam every day. Until Sam asked for advice on girls, his father never knew how to connect with him. Sam’s younger sister Casey has protected him in school and carried his lunch money for years. In having a girlfriend, Sam throws each of them in different directions.

Sam’s mother spends much of the series struggling to let go even a little bit. She is afraid Sam will not be able to handle heartbreak when dating goes wrong. She has set schedules and routines for Sam, such as her being the one to take him shopping. As all these things change, she is thrown off and ends up creating problems in her relationships with her entire family. Sam’s father left them for a period when Sam was a child because he could not handle the autism diagnosis. Since then, his parents’ relationship has been strained, so when Sam asks about love and finding a girlfriend, his father jumps at the opportunity to finally connect with his son. At the end of the season, Sam hugs his father for the first time. In this family, Casey has a different role. She is a loving sister who defends her brother while also picking on him as any sibling would.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

She is also left feeling ignored because her parents are more often worried about Sam. Including Sam's family and giving them their own stories allows the viewer to have a glimpse of what it may be like for some who have family members on the spectrum. It is not an exact copy of every family but elements of this family's dynamic on screen with each other and in having an autistic family member may be similar to real ones.

Atypical falls into the genre of dramedy, being a mix both family drama and comedy. With the comedy aspects, this show marks itself differently than a series like *The Big Bang Theory*. Sam and Sheldon Cooper share some similarities in that they both are socially awkward, have obsessive interest, and dislike change. Where they differ is in the fact that Sam is not often made the punchline of the joke. His autism and the traits that accompany it are not used to make the audience laugh at his expense. The series itself juggles the more serious aspects that can come with having a character on the spectrum with the use of well-executed humor and the family dynamics on the series. The family dynamics are where aspects of the family drama come into play. Here, the audience sees how the family works with and around the child with autism. At times, the family drama in these instances will deal with autism with the sense of it being a burden or as something to worry over. While that comes up in *Atypical*, these things do not make Sam less or seen as a problem. The burdens and worries that come forward in the series are more of an attempt to show the reality of living with a child on the spectrum. This is done through the well-rounded characters.

The work that went into this series off-screen is as important as discussing what the viewers experience onscreen. With this series, creator, writer, and executive producer Robia Rashid wanted not only to connect to those who have family members with special needs but

also to anyone searching for love, independence, and understanding.¹¹⁵ For her, the series is about telling Sam’s story rather than trying to tell the story of every person on the spectrum.¹¹⁶ The idea here was to give the perspective of someone with autism rather than having a non-autistic character telling the story for them. The issue is that it is not fully from an autistic perspective because there are no autistic people working in the creation of the series. She was inspired to create this series in part by the increases in diagnoses of autism over the last few years. Rashid felt that the story should be told because, like anyone else, people on the spectrum also search for love and acceptance.¹¹⁷ To create the series, Rashid and her team read books and blogs and brought in consultants. Ultimately, what Rashid wanted to do was create a family-focused show about living with autism but to also question what it means to be normal.

Conclusion

Atypical and *The Good Doctor* are giving the viewer an opportunity to understand different points of view. So often, we see people with autism spectrum disorders through the viewpoint of the neurotypicals around them. We end up seeing the common assumptions and stereotypes without seeing the individual. *The Good Doctor* is a series that works to celebrate the differences of others. The autistic savant is not a new character; it is actually the most common way in which autism is depicted in media. What is unique is how Shaun is represented. He is a main character with autism, he has flaws and strengths like anyone does, and he is also an individual with his own set of behaviors. *Atypical* works to show that people should question how society defines what is normal. Sam’s “high-functioning” autism is not a new view of

¹¹⁵ Darcel Rockett, “‘Atypical’ Reinforces Its Name with Portrayal of Special-Needs Families.” *Chicagotribune.com*, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/tv/ct-ent-atypical-netflix-0811-story.html>.

¹¹⁶ Mickey Rowe, “I’m Autistic and I Was Majorly Disappointed by Netflix’s New Show ‘Atypical.’” *Teen Vogue*, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/netflix-atypical-autism-representation>.

¹¹⁷ Eric Deggans, “Netflix, ABC Portrayals Of Autism Still Fall Short, Critics Say.” In *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/08/11/542668400/netflix-abc-portrayals-of-autism-still-fall-short-critics-say>.

autism in the sense that he is on what is referred to as the higher end of the spectrum. Showing how aware Sam is of his autism and how he works to understand the world he lives in is a new way of representing someone living with autism. While these two shows have their flaws at moments, such as depicting autism through white males and lacking autistic creators behind the scenes, they both work to give viewers the stories of Shaun and Sam, two characters who are living their lives and also happen to have autism.

IV: Conclusion

The overall goal of this thesis has been to open the door in discussing the changing representations of autism in television. In my first chapter, I provided an overview of the history of autism in media. Much of the past research looked at autism in film or news coverage; very little looked at its place in television. This led into my second chapter and the discussion of genre and autistic characters who were both labeled and unlabeled in television from 2007 to 2017. In Chapter Two, I found that many characters that were labeled with the disorder were in the medical drama but that the crime genre was the most likely to have a character perceived to be on the spectrum, although many were unlabeled. In this medical genre, I found that the label often helps when the character on the spectrum is cold or too intelligent because the diagnosis of autism provides a clear reason for these traits. Within the crime genre and even the sitcom, the lack of a clear diagnosis of autism seemed to be most about providing creative freedom without the baggage of a label. The unlabeled character may also help to give the audience a quirky character to become attached to.

With Chapter Two, I did see that as depictions of autism came out after 2007 and moved closer to 2017, there was a greater likelihood of the character being labeled. Series such as *Bones* and *Criminal Minds* started before 2007 and have toyed with the idea of labeling characters like Temperance Brennan or Spencer Reid but have not done so. With *Chicago Med* and even the episode of *Elementary* I viewed, the characters in question appeared in 2015 or later. These changes over when to label and when not to could potentially be due to the rise in awareness of autism and other forms of disability. Some of this increased awareness comes from film and television and some comes from the rise of social media and the ability for those within the disability community to tell their own stories. As media coverage and society have moved from

the blinding fear of vaccines causing autism and into this more gradual awareness and understanding, depictions of autism have started to change.

These changes in understanding and awareness are what led to the focus of Chapter Three. In this chapter, I looked to *The Good Doctor* and *Atypical*, two shows that premiered in 2017 with lead characters on the spectrum. These series both tackled the potential baggage that comes with having an autistic character on screen. Within each, the depiction was not about autism first or about the fears that have often come with that diagnosis in the past. It was not about how odd each character was or about using their autism to further the plot and other characters. Instead, both shows attempted to show each of the characters as individuals who also happen to have autism. They both set up the stepping stones for future shows to attempt this and to explore the spectrum further on screen.

With this thesis, I did have some limitations. The greatest limitation in my mind was time. There are very likely more than 21 characters between 2007 and 2017 who have been or seem to be on the spectrum. With the time frame I had to work on this, the 21 chosen to look at were based upon those that are most openly talked about within the autistic community. This discussion from the autistic community also posed some issues at times. This is because some characters that are occasionally discussed within these online forums are not as consistently agreed upon. One example of such comes from the CBS series *Scorpion*. In this there are a couple of characters that could be perceived by some as being on the spectrum but these same characters have also been discussed as not being on the spectrum. That left some characters being cut from the original list of around 30 that I started with. Another limitation to this thesis was in which characters I was able to analyze in the second chapter. Because of the time and the length of this project, it was not possible to do a textual analysis for every character I started to take note of in each genre. With the third chapter, there were limitations in that both *The Good*

Doctor and *Atypical* only had one season out which means there was no way to see how each series carries these characters across more than one season.

In the future, research could go in a number of ways. One path that could be taken would be a focus on the audience reception of the series and characters discussed in this thesis or others like them. With this, there could be a greater discussion comparing reception of the general viewing audience and of the autistic community. There could also be research looking at the creation of these types of series and who works on them. People with disabilities encompass around 20% of the population in the United States but only 2% of the characters in the top 10 rated shows and top 21 streaming shows in 2015 actually were disabled. Plus, 95% of the disabled characters on television are portrayed by able-bodied actors.¹¹⁸ This means that research could go into the hiring and production process. Finally, research could be done looking to the lack of women or people of color being depicted as autistic.

In the past, television has often been more focused on what those with disabilities could not do rather than what they could.¹¹⁹ Depictions of autism are changing on television screens because society is gaining a greater interest and understanding of it. Some of this increased awareness and desire to understand comes from social media and activism and some comes from the increasing number of diagnoses, now at 1 in 68.¹²⁰ Ultimately, there has been a gradual shift in society from a sole focus on the medical model approach and into the social model, from seeing only a diagnosis to seeing the person first. I have found that same shift reflected in television representations, as the new series debuting in the fall of 2017 more fully took on a

¹¹⁸ Hartman Squire, Tari, et al. "The Ruderman White Paper on the Challenge to Create More Authentic Disability Casting and Representation on TV." *Ruderman Family Foundation*, http://rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/tv_challenge_wp.pdf.

¹¹⁹ Appelbaum, Lauren. "Why #RepresentationMatters for People With Disabilities on TV." *The Mighty*, <https://themighty.com/2017/11/representationmatters-for-people-with-disabilities-on-tv/>.

¹²⁰ "CDC Newsroom." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2014/p0327-autism-spectrum-disorder.html>.

social approach to autism than have most previous representations. These depictions seen in *The Good Doctor* and *Atypical* are a starting point for autism being more in the forefront on screen. Over time, they will very likely change and improve, much like the stories of LGBT people or people of color have over years and years. None of these groups have perfect representations but these representations are constantly evolving. Even with some of the issues with these two shows such as the characters being straight, white males or being played by able-bodied, neurotypical actors, the series are both groundbreaking. They both have lead characters on the spectrum and have garnered the public's attention. This has led to greater discussions within the public, both about the good and bad aspects of the shows. The most important thing to remember with future research and in viewing these characters on screen is the saying within the autistic community: "If you know one person with autism, you know one person with autism." These latest series help to spread an awareness and understanding of this perspective.

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