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## **Watching Disability: A Discourse Analysis of Representations of Disabled Characters in Scripted Television Programs**

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WATCHING DISABILITY: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATIONS  
OF DISABLED CHARACTERS IN SCRIPTED TELEVISION PROGRAMS

by

Wilbur Justin Martin

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Sciences  
and the School of Communication  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a discourse analysis of three television series, *Speechless*, *Atypical*, and *Breaking Bad*. A close reading of those series was performed to analyze the representations of disability in those television series and whether those representations enforced classic stereotypes or differed from those classic stereotypes for disabilities. The representations were also analyzed to see if those representations enforced the medical or social model of disability.

All three series had instances of stereotypical representations as well as representations that were not stereotypical. All three series representations identified with the medical and social model of disabilities. Series that used an outside expert consultant and more disabled characters represented by disabled actors had more textured representations.

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Nancy N. Martin, without whom this would not have been possible. Thank you for your continued support, even when you probably didn't want to continue.

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## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Gimpy, crippled, giant, retarded, infirm, lame, midget, handicapped, slow, invalid, debilitated, deformed, incapacitated, dwarf, incapable, paralyzed: those words, and many others, have been used historically to group people with a different set of abilities than a typical person. The above descriptive words carry a general meaning that most people have used to describe some aspect of a person, often in an unflattering light. “His brother is a moron” is more likely to be used as an insult versus a strict definition of a person’s brother using Henry Goddard’s archaic generalizations. In general, words used to group people into a category tend to dismiss the value of the individual and relegate that individual to a stereotype.

Robert Funk offers a thorough historical account of civil rights for disabled people in his article, *From Caste to Class in the Context of Civil Rights*. Funk (1987) starts by examining from the 1700s through 1920, and states that disabled were often euthanized, were the responsibility of family, or were warehoused in state-operated institutions, often grouped by disability (p. 9 - 10). Funk (1987) continues with a second era, 1920 – 1960, which he terms a period of segregation and charitable care (p. 10). This era is seen as more institutionalized care, but there were changes to entitlement programs and expansion in rehabilitation and vocational training for disabled people (Funk, 1987, p. 10). There was also considerable growth during this era in disability services and jobs for professionals in physical and occupational therapy and rehabilitation counseling (Funk, 1987, p. 10). While there were some changes, Funk (1987) states that “the handicapped still retained their caste status in the public mind as dependent, unhealthy

deviants, who would, in the great majority, always require segregated care and protection” (p. 14).

Funk (1987) calls the era from 1960 – 1975 the “Social Movements and Civil Rights” era (p. 14). Disability rights followed the templates of other civil rights groups, and disabled people started fighting for equality (Funk, 1987 p. 14). Handicapped was added as a protected class regarding civil rights, and lawyers used equal protection challenges to attack segregation (Funk, 1987, p. 16). Funk’s (1987) next era, 1976 – 1985, is named “A Changing Society” (p. 17). Disabled people, armed with new rights, were now fighting for reforms versus family and friends having to do the fighting (Funk, 1987, p. 17). So, even in 1987, four years before the passage of the American’s with Disabilities Act, Funk’s (1987) conclusion about the struggle for disability rights recognizes that the public views disabled people as a distinct class “oppressed by attitudes and images that perpetuate the caste of the handicapped” (p. 22). Funk (1987) laments the lack of physical access, which has been addressed by the ADA, even though there are still myriad problems with access, typically in rural or older towns (p. 25). However, another lamentation that has not been altered by the passage of the ADA is “the area of discriminatory attitudes and prejudice regarding the class of handicapped persons” (Gleidman and Roth, 1980, p. 13-30, as cited by Funk, 1987, p. 26; Safilios-Rothchild, 1970, p. 58).

Many laws have been passed in the U.S. with the goal of ending discrimination toward disabled people, which comprise the largest minority in the U.S. (Brault, 2012). The National Mental Health Act (P.L. 79-487, 60 Stat. L. 421) established the National Institute of Mental Health, which is dedicated to researching psychiatric disorders. The

Social Security Amendments of 1956 added Social Security Disability Insurance for disabled workers to US Social Security (1956 Social Security Amendments). The American National Standard Institute published the first set of building standards for disability access in 1961 (American Standard Specifications). The Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 (42 U.S.C. §§ 4151 et seq.) requires federal buildings to comply with federal access standards. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. §§ 1400 et seq.) requires public schools to provide education to disabled students based on individual needs. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. §§ 791 – 794) prohibits discrimination based on disability in federal programs and employment. The Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act of 1984 (42 U.S.C. §§1973 et seq.) requires physical access to people for federal elections.

Arguably, the most well-known law passed for the benefit of disabled people is the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA, signed into law on July 26, 1990, sought to end discrimination toward disabled people (ADA.gov). However, as the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the ADA nears, discrimination against disabled people is alive and well. Walking around a downtown area most anywhere can reveal numerous ADA violations with likely no plan of action to correct the situation. It is through the lens of discrimination and social oppression that this research is considering disabled people. Social oppression, for this research project, is informed by Iris Young (1990), who offers this definition of “social oppression” from her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*:

[O]ppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-

meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural forms of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms – in short, the normal processes of everyday life. We cannot eliminate this structural oppression by getting rid of the rulers or making some new laws, because oppressions are systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutes (p. 41).

It is obvious that legislation alone will not prevent discrimination against disabled people.

Disabled people need change agents to help educate and alter the minds and hearts of people in society. Educating the masses about the needs and desires of disabled people is difficult. Traditional education in public schools might be an avenue, but school days are crammed with academics and testing leaving little to no time for additional subjects. Additionally, a required subject approach in public education would miss students that go to private schools. Mandated classes would doubtless have as little affect as all of the previous legislation. Beyond public primary schools, the costs of a college education are significant, with undergraduates seemingly going broke to pay for classes. With fully funded students, the motivation is time, stated as “I have to graduate this semester!” While society might benefit from a required battery of classes regarding subjects like race, gender, sexuality, ability, and basic logic, the classes that center on disability are typically approached from the outdated “medical model” (described below) (Rosa, Bogart, Bonnett, Estill, & Colton, 2016, p. 43). The best shot at educating society about disability might come by way of a branch of research known broadly as Disability Studies.

Disability studies scholar Simi Linton (2005) stated that the goal of disability studies was

to weave disabled people back into the fabric of society, thread by thread, theory by theory. [Disability studies] aims to expose the ways that disability has been made exceptional and to work to naturalize disabled people – remake us as full citizens whose rights and privileges are intact, whose history and contributions are recorded, and whose often distorted representations in art, literature, film, theater, and other forms of artistic expression are fully analyzed. (p. 518)

Linton (2005) states that what keeps disabled people from fitting into society is based in part on the “representational and institutional structures” disabled people face (p. 518)

Classical literature is littered with centuries of negative and “exaggerated stereotypes” regarding representations of disability (explored below), so those that teach such literature might be able to correct or explain the disconnect (Margolis and Shapiro, 1987, p. 21). Those outmoded passages should nonetheless be discussed, not only for the sake of the literature, but also to analyze the messages in light of the misconceptions (Margolis and Shapiro, 1987, p. 21). By not providing a richer depiction of disabilities, educators are not only misinforming students, but those educators also impact disabled students (Schramm, 1969). Going beyond strictly literature, all mass media influence users in forming reactions to situations (Schramm, 1974), especially in the case of younger viewers (Meyer, 1973).

There are well-grounded theories that have been used to support the idea that the actions people observe cause people to mimic or model the observed behavior, and repeated exposure serves to imprint the actions on people (Bandura, 1969, as cited by Hartjen, 1974). Bandura (1973) found that those people that modeled behavior based on observation were partly determined by how the people were rewarded for modeling such behavior (p. 122). Once the modeled behavior is transformed into memory codes through repetition of the modeled behavior, a person's memory codes act as guides for people to reproduce the modeled behavior in like circumstances (Bandura, 1973, p. 122-3).

In 1975, Robert Liebert presented research regarding television and televised programming and the impact of those on children precisely through the theory of observational learning in a conference of New York state educators regarding children's attitudes toward disabled people. Liebert (1975) starts by defining "attitude" and the components of an "attitude": cognition, affectation, and behavior (p. 43-5). Liebert (1975) states that those attitudes are created and maintained through observational learning (p. 46). Often, a child's attitudes about disabled people are formed from observation of others' interactions with disabled people versus direct instruction, particularly when there is no disabled person in a child's life (Liebert, 1975, p. 47). As such, Liebert (1975) claims that a child's likely first observation of a disabled person is from a television program or a film (p. 47).

Liebert (1975) then goes through the steps involved in observational learning, starting with exposure to a situation (p. 47). If a child's exposure to a disabled person is based in a stereotype versus a more nuanced and realistic representation of disability, the attitude being formed is inherently stereotypical, too (Liebert, 1975, p. 47). Secondly,

acquisition is considered – what was learned as a result of an observation (Liebert, 1975, p. 47). The last state is acceptance of the interaction observed – a child forming or adjusting his or her attitude as a result of the observation (Liebert, 1975, p. 47). When you consider the reality of a child’s life, because of the layers of social interactions with teachers, peers, parents, and media, many different models of observations are subject to being modeled by a child (Liebert, 1975, p. 50-1). What is most convincing for a child is observing a consistent pattern of behaviors (Liebert, 1975, p. 51). Multiple observations of realistic interactions with disabled people would have a large impact on a child forming a realistic attitude toward interacting with disabled people (Liebert, 1975, p. 51). Many televised programs are, of course, fictitious, but those observed interactions provide children and adults with behaviors that are modeled after observations (Liebert, 1975, p. 56). As such, “fictional stories about fictional people do, remarkably potently, teach real people lessons about how to deal with the real world” (Liebert, 1975, p. 57).

Bandura’s social cognitive theory of mass communication suggests even further evidence of how a person’s experiences impact that person’s attitudes and behavior (see Bandura, 2001). Bandura (2001) sees people as not only products of the social systems they inhabit, but also as producers of social systems, which are integrated as “codeterminants” influencing behavior (p. 266). People act, undergo self-reflection to judge the adequacy of his or her act, and adjust future actions accordingly (Bandura, 2001, p. 268). When a person judges his or her action to a situation based on social reality that is distorted from a poor media representation, the resulting future actions can be distorted (Hawkins & Pingree, 1982, as cited by Bandura, 2001, p. 269). In addition, when people depend more on media images to inform reality, the greater the impact of

those media images (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, as cited by Bandura, 2001, p. 271). As such, these “electric modes of influence,” media images, are a major vehicle for social change (Bandura, 2001, p. 271). Representations of reality in televised programs reflect societal norms and shape a user’s belief (see Adoni & Mane, 1984; Flerx, Fidler, & Rogers, 1976; Gerbner, 1972; O’Bryant & Corder-Bolz, 1978, as cited by Bandura, 2001, p. 281-2). Media can be a behavior teacher, a behavior motivator, a social motivator through people who have modeled media behaviors, and as such, media representations originate behaviors and enforce behaviors, too (Bandura, 2001, p. 286).

If legislation and public education have been inadequate in affecting behavior toward disabled people, but media have an obvious influence on attitudes, behavior, and social systems, media representations of disabled people would arguably be a suitable means to affect changes in behavior toward disabled people. While this researcher would gladly welcome a change in society’s behavior and attitudes toward disabled people, it is hardly something that one person can affect. The best course of action is to expose how current representations of disabilities on televised programs serve to enforce or reject the classic representations of disabilities in various media. With that being stated, the goal of this research project is to build on previous research regarding media representations of disability. This project will research character representations of disability in media, considering the historical models of disability (disabled = defective, super cripp, inspiration) through previous discourse analysis of literature, film, and television to show how the current models of disability representations were formed. This project will also look at the various ways the treatment of disability has undergone a change from the historical perceptions of the “medical model” into the more accepted “social model” as

well as the future of disability models. The major focus of this research project is to conduct a close reading and critical discourse analysis on three contemporary television programs, *Speechless*, *Atypical*, and *Breaking Bad*.

These three programs were chosen for the diversity of disabilities represented: cerebral palsy in *Speechless*; autism spectrum in *Atypical*; cerebral palsy, paralysis, and stroke in *Breaking Bad*. Regarding programs on television as of May two-thousand and twenty, only *Atypical* and *The Good Doctor*, which is not a subject in this research, have disabled characters in major roles. In addition, the three were chosen to see how disabilities are represented in three diverse outlets: free, traditional broadcast television in the case of ABC's comedy *Speechless*; the evolving universe of subscription Internet programming, Netflix in particular, is represented by the dramedy *Atypical*; and a basic cable in the case of the AMC's crime drama *Breaking Bad*. To be blunt, the shows being analyzed are the only shows available to analyze.

From David Perry, the best thing about the television show *Speechless* is that "it simply shows that that people with disabilities are human beings, and, like everyone else, they have specific life experiences that can be used to fuel a classic family-centered sitcom" (2016). Let us back up a bit.

*Speechless* is a sitcom that aired on the ABC network that features emerging, disabled actor Micah Fowler as JJ DiMeo, a non-verbal teenager with cerebral palsy (CP). (Broverman, 2016, p. 30). Scott Silveri, known for his work on *Friends* and *Joey*, created the series to mimic his experience growing up, as he has a brother with CP (Broverman, 2016, p. 30). JJ is non-verbal on the show, but he does have a voice, as such – school janitor Kenneth Clements (Cedric Yarborough) (Rovenstine, 2016). Equally

large in the *Speechless* world is Maya DiMeo (Minnie Driver), who is a tireless and fearless advocate and force for JJ (Perry, 2016). Kenneth also adds another dimension, both as an advocate and spokesperson for JJ, but also as a separate character (Perry, 2016).

*Speechless* earned positive reviews, was nominated for four awards in 2017, and won the 2017 Television Critics Association Award for “Outstanding Achievement in Youth Programming” (*Speechless* awards, n.d.). The Television Academy, which “recognizes programs that tackle social issues and use television as a forum advocate for social change,” honored *Speechless* as well (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2017).

Netflix’s dramedy *Atypical* premiered Friday, August 11, 2017, and was a break from the traditional Netflix model of “anything but TV” in that at the heart of *Atypical* is the story of a boy, Sam Gardner (Keir Gilchrist), growing up (Barr, 2017). The twist is that Gardner is on the autistic spectrum (Barr, 2017). Created by Robia Rashid, known for her work on *Will & Grace* and *How I Met Your Mother*, early press called *Atypical* one of the best shows of the year, with TV critic Merrill Barr saying *Atypical* is “the best original series Netflix has ever produced” (Barr, 2017). Seasons one and two of *Atypical* were received well by critics and viewers alike (*Atypical*, 2017), and *Atypical* was nominated for the Best Musical or Comedy Series award in the 2018 Satellite Awards (Pond, 2017). In addition, The Autism Society honored *Atypical* at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual AutFest film festival for portraying autism in a positive light and promoting autism awareness (PR Newswire, 2018). *Atypical* received Spotlight Awards and its producers participated in a question and answer session at AutFest (PR Newswire, 2018).

While the show received praise for comedic timing, Sam's employment, and the other characters' advocacy for Sam, there were also come complains, most notably that many of Sam's character traits are stereotypical tropes, and while the characters advocate for Sam, the character has little agency for himself (Felperin, 2017; Moss, 2017). Many of the complaints about the stereotypical actions of Sam are corrected in the second season, as more input from people on the autism spectrum were used to give Sam a richer, more textured representation of autism (Luterman, 2018). However, the most glaring complaint was that Keir Gilchrist is playing Sam Gardner in "autistic drag" (Rowe, 2017).

At the most basic, *Breaking Bad* is a crime drama revolving around Walter White's desire to provide a future for his family by engaging in manufacturing crystal methamphetamine that aired on the basic cable network AMC from January 20, 2008 through September 29, 2013 (Pierson, 2013). A major subtext in the program was the fragility of stability for middle class families played out as a post-modern white hat/black hat western (Pierson, 2013). Vince Gilligan, well known as a writer for *The X-Files*, created the series with his friend, Thomas Schnauz, and AMC saw the show as a way to draw male viewers and to shed the idea that AMC only showed classic movies (Pierson, 2013). *Breaking Bad* was a huge success for AMC, with plenty of critical praise, including the number three spot on *Rolling Stone's* "100 Greatest TV Shows of all Time," behind *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* (Sheffield, 2016). As a testament to the show, through the five-year run of the series, *Breaking Bad* has been nominated for fifty-eight television industry awards, winning twenty-eight awards (*Breaking Bad -- Awards and Nominations*, n.d.). *Breaking Bad* is a large undertaking in that there are five seasons of

intense crime drama with three disabled characters: Walter White, Jr. was born with cerebral palsy; Don Hector Salamanca, a Mexican mobster, had a stroke and cannot speak or walk; and Walter White's brother in law, a temporary paraplegic with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, DEA officer Hank Schrader (Breaking Bad wiki, n.d.).

## CHAPTER II - LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHOD

### Television's Role in Disability Discourse

A discourse might be considered a discussion or possibly a debate on a topic.

Klaus Schneider and Anne Barron (2014) suggest a discourse can be considered narrowly, or as “spoken language alone,” or more broadly, referring to discourse as “the totality of a social interaction,” but may overlap and differ in meaning, according to use (p. 1-2). Another view of discourse is that it is a systematic exchange of shared meanings emphasizing power relations in which “the process of production and exchange are . . . ‘materialized’ within the text” (Acosta-Alzuru and Lester-Roushanzamir, 2000, p. 307). John Fiske (1987) sees discourse as a “system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area . . . a social act which may promote or oppose the dominant ideology” (p. 14). Fiske states that the people engaged in a discourse construct self-serving meaning that reinforce common experiences (Fiske, 1987, p. 14). But certainly, those self-serving meanings could also be used to challenge the dominant culture, too.

Stephen Schneck's (1987) analysis of Michael Foucault's viewpoint metamorphosis regarding discourse, power, and knowledge shows 1) Foucault sees the bourgeois/superstructure as enforcing the relationship between power and knowledge to control **reality** (emphasis added) and therefore to control discourse; 2) if knowledge and reality is controlled and influenced by power, all discourse is biased toward the desired outcomes of the bourgeois/superstructure; and 3) knowledge is inevitably derived from the relationship between power and discourse (p. 23-4). As Lennard Davis (1998) mentions, Foucault offers a more complex and nuanced definition of discourse that does

not rely on class and exploitation, but rather on power, which, unlike class, “has a life of its own” (p. 319). Being that television programs are the discourse being considered, and television programs are the product of the superstructure, Foucault’s web of meanings approach for television programs evidences that production companies produce programs to create and enforce a reality in which they remain in power. That should be taken into consideration.

Norman Fairclough (1992) says a discourse analysis must include a linguistic analysis of the text, a detailed examination of the dialog, as well as an intertextual analysis, or how the text has been influenced by other texts as well as how the text being analyzed might influence other texts as well as the influence on differently situated audiences (p. 194). There are others researchers (see Fiske, 1987; Fürsich, 2009; Gray & Lotz, 2012; Molina, 2009; Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983; Philo, 2007; Williams, 1974; among others) that argue a strict textual analysis of a discourse without considering context, audience, history, and producers, is not sufficient. The later presumption regarding discourse analysis seems to be especially fitting for this research project in light of the above analysis of Foucault’s concept of discourse and the triangulation between power, knowledge, and discourse.

### *Analyzing Television*

A great question regarding television comes from an early television critic, Charles Siepmann (1950), who blankly asked, “[w]hat are the true ends (true in the sense of socially constructive) of modern mass communication? What does it have to say? . . . What policy will be adopted . . . [w]hose voice will be decisive in the formulation of a policy?” (p. 330). Siepmann (1950) suggests the public will be clueless in shaping policy

(p. 330). Siepmann (1950), quoting Frank Stanton, a former head of CBS, stated that broadcasters would seek to supply programming with “broad appeal” (p. 330). Siepmann (1950) dismisses that end and states that “the glory of a democratic society [is] that it not merely tolerates but encourages difference, that its concern is with the full flowering of diverse individuality, not of conformity and mass-mindedness” (p. 331).

Siepmann (1950) finally accepts that the advertiser’s wishes of reaching the largest audience will result in “lowest-common-denominator programming” (p. 333). Siepmann’s (1950) patently bourgeois judgment of television users is obvious when he mentions that the large number of middle- and lower-income television purchasers, rather than the “well-to-do,” “affects the likely character of programs offered” (p. 338). Siepmann (1950) does perceive a bright spot on television’s programming and purpose when he mentions that the education of children is an obvious use for television, but educational use requires skilled teachers (p. 349, 351).

Shortly After Siepmann’s speculation, in 1954, Theodor Adorno, the German philosopher and social critic, weighed in on television with a pilot study considering how to measure the effects of television. Adorno’s (1954) research sought to identify and solidify the theoretical concepts through which the effects of television could be studied (p. 213). Adorno (1954) also hoped that by exposing television programs’ effects on viewers that he could educate the audience that the programs presented a “false realism” so as to not be influenced by televised programs (p. 213).

Adorno (1954) believed that to make any judgments on the effects of television, a researcher first needed to determine the similarities with “low” art, geared toward the masses, and “autonomous art,” or art for art’s sake (p. 214). Adorno (1954) stated that

popular culture had “seized” all artist expression so pervasively that no one could escape the influence, from the “rural” and therefore uneducated population to people with a “higher level of education” (p. 215). Adorno’s (1954) prescient rumination about popular culture, television in this instance, was that “[t]he more the system of ‘merchandising’ culture is expanded, the more it tends to assimilate the ‘serious’ art of the past by adapting this art to the system’s own requirements” (p. 215).

Adorno (1954) hit upon the idea of television as being polysemic (discussed below) when he stated that “the full effect of the material on the spectator cannot be studied without consideration of the hidden meaning in conjunction with the overt one” (p. 221). Adorno (1954) even somewhat naively questions whether the “sinister effect” of the latent messages in programs is purposeful (p. 225). Similarly, Adorno (1954) believes that stereotyping is a necessity, but also believes that rigid stereotypes will cause television users not to alter his or her viewpoint based on personal experiences (p. 229). Interestingly, no conclusions or suggestions of appropriate theories for television viewer are suggested in the article, save for the idea that television is crude but complex, and should be investigated.

In the book *Television Studies*, Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz (2012) write that early television research, much like research into newspapers and radio, was rooted in social sciences and likely focused on strong effects-based models, such as the bullet/hypodermic needle theory (p. 8). When television was in full-swing, the post-war economic and cultural boom of the 1950s, media research had changed into a more-limited effects model (Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 9). Fast forward just a bit to the 60s, and television research by social scientists was augmented by the humanities, that researched

television “via linguistics, and joined with the anthropologists and literary critics who were won over by the new semiology” (Katz, 1977, p. 27 as cited by Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 11).

The study of television was also augmented by the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), which was founded by Richard Hoggart in 1964 (Gray & Lotz, 2019, p. 14) Instead of studying television as an “art,” CCCS considered how television supported the dominant culture (Gray & Lotz, 2019, p. 14). As cultural studies became more accepted by the academy, television moved into the spotlight because of the broad acceptance and appeal as entertainment (Gray & Lotz, p. 12). As suggested by Adorno, television critics started to consider the patent and latent messages in television programs as well as how the producers of these television programs supported dominant ideologies through enforcing false consciousness regarding worker/class relationships, race relationships, gender relationships, economics, sexuality, and ability.

### *Television as a Text*

In reference to Roland Barthes, Bernard Dauenhauer (1982) states that Barthes definition of a text is “a tissue of citations flowing from countless cultural sources” (p. 137). Barthes (1972) stated that “the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination” (p. 15, as cited by Dauenhauer, 1982, p. 137). Similarly, Jacques Derrida (1979) considered a text as “a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself” (p. 83-4, as cited by Dauenhauer, 1982, p. 137). The seemingly unconstrained concepts of text, as posited by Barthes and Derrida, have been stretched further by cultural studies such that any cultural practice or production can be *read* (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240). A “close reading” method of discourse analysis is often

preferred for analyzing televised texts, as a close textual analysis can uncover ideological assumptions underlying texts, can offer a nuanced explanation of those texts, and can also discover what is missing from the texts (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240-1).

In further support of the openness and concept of “text,” Fiske (1987), in his book *Television Culture*, states that “programs are produced, distributed, and defined by the [television] industry: texts are the product of their readers” (p. 14). A television program becomes a text when an audience member assigns a meaning to what was viewed (Fiske, 1987, p. 14).

Fiske (1987) continues, “[A] textual study of television, then, involves three foci: the formal qualities of television programs and their flow; the intertextual relations of television within itself, with other media, and with conversation; and the study of socially situated readers and the process of reading” (p. 16). Adding to Fiske’s definition of a textual study of television are Gray and Lotz (2012), who state that a textual study considers not only the lighting, set, shot composition, and script, but also considers in what ways the text relates to a culture’s dominant ideology: the discourse proposed by the text (p. 37). Researchers should consider also how the dominant culture seeks to control reality and knowledge, and therefore the discourse (Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 22; see also Foucault, as cited above).

As mentioned above, Fiske (1987) says a research project should focus on “intertextual relations” regarding television analysis to derive at meaning from a text (p. 16; see also Fairclough, 1992 and Gray & Lotz, 2012, among others). Fiske’s (1987) concept of “intertextuality” is that texts should be compared to similarly situated texts so a researcher has a more broad basis of knowledge through which to decode the text in

question; one text does not define another, as such, but by considering similarly situated texts, a researcher can get a more valid picture of the text being considered (p. 108).

Going further, Fiske (1987) states that having intertextual knowledge helps to “pre-orient the reader to exploit television’s polysemy by activating the text in certain ways . . . a text’s intertextual relations can provide us with valuable clues to the readings that a particular culture or subculture is likely to produce” (Fiske, 1987, p. 108).

In addition to a researcher’s consideration into intertextuality, Gray & Lotz (2012) suggest the concept of considering “paratextuality,” or texts beyond the program such as promotion and public relations articles, producer or actor bonus material available online or included with a show’s media, and similar pieces of ephemera that may exist contemporaneously with a program (p. 133). The extra material might possibly work as an intertext, as paratextual material likely influences a program’s audience and can possibly shed light on some of the latent meanings in the programs (Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 134).

### *Multiplicity of Messages*

As far back as 1954, Theodor Adorno was concerned with the patent and latent meanings in a television program. Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch (1983) considered that television programs displayed a pleasant veneer of “entertainment,” but also considered that the underlying subtext of television programs were message delivery vehicles supporting the dominant culture (p. 46). Fiske (1987) also noted that television programs were proficient at provoking discourse among the audience, too, and much like Foucault, Fiske (1987) sees the discourse provoked is used to enforce the

power/knowledge relationship that supports the dominant culture; this clearly helps builds a reality that supports the dominant culture with the audience (p.1).

Further, Fiske's (1987) belief is that television producers use codes in programs that are "agents of intertextuality" that tie a text to other texts to compose and support the dominant culture (p.4). In another nod to Foucault, Fiske (1987) acknowledges that since knowledge is controlled and influenced by power, "reality" is also influenced by power, and that shifts all discourse to support the dominant culture (p. 5). Specifically, Fiske (1987b) said, "[c]haracters on television are not just representations of individual people but are encodings of ideology . . . these [ideological codes] . . . relate the televisual use to their broader use in the culture at large" (as cited by Fiske, 1987a, p. 9). The codes presented to the audience are fluid, however, and different interpretations from differently situated audiences should be expected (See Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983; Fiske, 1987a). Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) state that television in general:

[P]resents a multiplicity of meanings rather than a monolithic dominant point of view. It often focuses on our most prevalent concerns, our deepest dilemmas. Our most traditional views, those that are repressive and reactionary, as well as those that are subversive and emancipatory, are upheld, examined, maintained, and transformed. The emphasis is on process rather than product, on discussion rather than indoctrination, on contradiction and confusion rather than coherence (p. 54).

As mentioned above, and revisited here, Fiske sees that television programs do not become a text and enter the discourse only after being seen by an audience. Fiske (1987a), like Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) and Adorno (1954) before him, sees television

programs as *polysemic* (emphasis added), stating, “a program provides a potential of meanings which may be realized, or made into actually experienced meanings, by socially situated viewers in the process of reading” (p. 15 – 6). Each audience member brings his or her own experiences, attitudes, individualism, and will come away with a unique read of the text; the reads will be inherently biased toward the dominant culture, because knowledge and power exist only to support the dominant culture.

## Disability Studies and Theory

### *Defining “Disability”*

In choosing to write about a subject as varied as disability representations, a good starting point would probably be to actually define “disability.” Tanya Titchkosky’s article, *Disability Studies: The Old and the New*, presents a catalog of definitions, signifiers, and significations of disability through history. Lennard Davis (1995a, 1995b) traces “the disabled” as being cataloged as far back as the Enlightenment, albeit classified as a “fascination” (as cited by Titchkosky, 2000, p. 200). Disability as a “social problem” emerged because of medical advancements, soldiers returning from war instead of merely dying on the battlefield, and the industrial revolution with the concept of the “deserving poor” (see the “economic model” of disabilities explored below) (see Jones, 1994; Liachowitz, 1988; Russell, 1998; Shapiro, 1993; Stone, 1984, as cited by Titchkosky, p. 200). Titchkosky (2000), in surveying disabilities in regard to academics, makes note that sociologists have studied disabilities in some form for a long time (See Durkheim, (1964 [1895] as an example), but in a critical sense, is still a very new discipline (p. 202).

Erving Goffman (1963) gives disability a sociological treatment as he considers a society’s reaction to a physical, mental or “tribal” “abomination” in a person; in his terms

a “stigma,” which makes a person **less** than human (emphasis added) (p. 4, as cited by Titchlosky, 2000, p. 203). People who lack a stigma or an “undesirable difference” can serve to stigmatize people, and are termed “normal” (Goffman, 1964, p.4 as cited by Titchlosky, 2000, p. 203) As a disability can often be the result of a traumatic event, a disability is a physical signification, a stigma, and an event, or the source of the stigma (Titchlosky, 2000, p. 205). After the ADA was signed into law, and disabled people gained the status of a person in the U.S., disabled people are still considered deviant, although at times “involuntary deviant” (Sagarin, 1975, as cited by Titchlosky 2000, p, 206). “Disability” differs from “deviance” as “disability” is a condition and not a conscious behavior, and disabled people experience the social sanctions that end up as a stigma (Clinard and Meier, 1998 [1957], p. 482 as cited by Titchlosky, 2000, p. 206). Titchlosky (2000) states that in modern sociology, a disability is a “condition,” and is stripped of any social significance – which is also problematic in that society still considers disabled people deviant based on reactions, and therefore not actually reflecting society (p. 206).

Titchlosky (2000) excoriates the hackneyed definitions, portrayals and models (along with much of the appurtenant writing about “disabilities”) by stating that sociology teaches “normals” to associate their discomfort with disability as the fault of the disabled person, and to disassemble the concept that a disability is not a possibility for everyone (p. 209). Certainly, disability is not the norm – only 12.8% of the U.S. population – the **second largest minority** (emphasis added) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). However, “normal” people “regard people with visible physical handicaps as being apart from other human beings; many people today look on them with pity or avoid them all

together” (Clinard and Meier, 1998, p. 491, as cited by Titchlosky, 2000, p. 209).

Mike Oliver (1983) considers a person’s limitation, such as not being able to walk, an impairment, while the inability to access a building as the true meaning of disability; lack of sight is an impairment, and the inability to access material to read is the disability (as cited by French, 1993, p. 17). However, Sally French (1993), a visually impaired scholar, points out that her inability to read non-verbal cues in a conversation is not a problem that a caring and mindful society could solve, thereby being impaired **and** disabled (emphasis added) (French, 1993, p. 17-8). Oliver (1987) and Vic Finkelstein (1990) suggest that wholesale education have been “remarkably unsuccessful” in changing attitudes toward disabled people (as noted above). Continuing this thread, Morris (1991) states that as much as a disabled person can charge society with discrimination, the effects of discrimination are personal (as cited by French, 1993, p. 19).

As a part of the British government, Amelia Harris (1971) conducted a survey regarding disability in the U.K., and had a three-tiered set of terms was identified for classification of disabilities: 1) impairment signified the lack of a limb, or having a defective body mechanism; 2) disability: a loss or reduction of a function; and 3) handicap: a disadvantage or restriction caused by a disability (as cited by Oliver, 1993, p. 62). The U.K.’s definition of “disability” that is seen in the Disability Discrimination Acts of 1995 and 2005 is paraphrased by Thomas as a “mental or physical impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities” (Thomas, 2007, p. 12). Thomas also cites the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps

definition of disability, which is “any restriction or lack (resulting from impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being” (Bickenbach *et al.*, 1999, p. 1175, as cited by Thomas, 2007, p. 12-3).

In her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) seeks to transform disability from being in the realm of a medical condition, to being “a form of ethnicity” (p. 6). Garland-Thomson suggests moving the discussion of a person’s disability as a physical state to considering that one’s disability “as a reading of bodily peculiarities in the context of social power relations . . . a representation, a cultural interpretation of physical transformation or configuration” (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.6). Disability’s definition under that schema is assigning a value to a body not based on strictly physical abilities, but rather what culture deems a body should, or should not, do (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.6).

The ADA’s definition of a disability is found at Title 42, chapter 126, U.S.C. § 12102:

(1) Disability

The term "disability" means, with respect to an individual

(A) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual;

(B) a record of such an impairment; or

(C) being regarded as having such an impairment (as described in paragraph (3)).

(2) Major Life Activities

(A) In general

For purposes of paragraph (1), major life activities include, but are not limited to, caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, seeing, hearing, eating, sleeping, walking, standing, lifting, bending, speaking, breathing, learning, reading, concentrating, thinking, communicating, and working.

(B) Major bodily functions

For purposes of paragraph (1), a major life activity also includes the operation of a major bodily function, including but not limited to, functions of the immune system, normal cell growth, digestive, bowel, bladder, neurological, brain, respiratory, circulatory, endocrine, and reproductive functions.

(3) Regarded as having such an impairment

For purposes of paragraph (1)(C):

(A) An individual meets the requirement of "being regarded as having such an impairment" if the individual establishes that he or she has been subjected to an action prohibited under this chapter because of an actual or perceived physical or mental impairment whether or not the impairment limits or is perceived to limit a major life activity.

(B) Paragraph (1)(C) shall not apply to impairments that are transitory and minor. A transitory impairment is an impairment with an actual or expected duration of 6 months or less (The Americans with Disabilities Act, Title 42, Chapter 126 § 12101 – 12213 and Title 47, Chapter 5, § 225 and § 611).

The ADA is considered the legal definition for disability in the U.S., yet there are a significant number of words that are not satisfying when actually trying to parse the answer to the question, what is a disability? Garland-Thomson (1997) states that “‘impairment’ and ‘limits’ depend on comparing individual bodies with unstated but determining norms, a hypothetical set of guidelines for corporeal form and function arising from the cultural expectations about how human beings should look and act” (p. 7). Stairs, a “constructed impediment” for a wheelchair user, are no longer an “impairment” if a ramp is also present (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 7). In essence, disability is less about physical attributes, but about society’s representation of ability and social relationships: “[O]ne group is legitimized by possessing valued physical characteristics and maintains its ascendancy and self-identity by systematically imposing the role of cultural or corporeal inferiority on others” (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 7). In that way, disabled people are the “stigmatized other whose social role is to symbolically free the privileged idealized figure of the American self from the vagaries and vulnerabilities of embodiment” (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 7). On the other hand, if a person considers **all** of the characteristics that mark a person as being “normal”: gender (male), age (younger), marital status (married, presumably with children), race (Caucasian), region of the country (urban and in the north eastern U.S.), sexuality (heterosexual), religion (Protestant), education (college graduate), and employed, the number of people fitting that mold is hardly a majority (Goffman, 1963, p. 128, as cited by Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 8).

The World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of "disability" is almost a mirror image of what many people in disability studies agree upon as the "social model of disability" (discussed below):

Disability is not an attribute of an individual, but rather a complex collection of conditions, many of which are created by the social environment. Hence the management of the problem requires social action, and it is the collective responsibility of society at large to make the changes necessary for full participation of people with disabilities in all areas of social life. (WHO, 2001, p. 28, as cited by Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 73).

Vic Finkelstein's (1993) belief is that a disabled person's self-image has a lot to do with that person's concept of "disability" (p. 9). Jenny Morris (1993) mirrors that statement by asking whether disabled people can have self-pride when able-bodied people evidence negative beliefs regarding disabled people (p. 101). If a disabled person sees a disability because of a physical or mental impairment, seeking assistance from someone else is a normal activity; if discrimination is causing an impaired person's disability, then help eradicating the discrimination is the preferred assistance (Finkelstein, 1993, p. 9). Regardless as to the cause, the label "disabled" is a reality regarding access to social services, and assistance devices are signifiers of the presence of a disability (Finkelstein, 1993, p. 13). If the label "disabled" might harm a person's chance at success, then maybe an impaired person can rationalize him or herself at the top of the heap as a variation of "normal," and relegate the "others" as truly "disabled" (Finkelstein, 1993, p. 13). As a wheelchair user, I am merely "mobility oppressed" by the

environment; those poor souls with a learning disability, now **they** are the truly “disabled,” thereby subjecting others with impairments to a medical label (emphasis added) (Finkelstein, 1993, p. 14).

Alan Gartner (1984) also sees shades of racism and sexism afoot when disabled people are forced into a definition determined only by “normal” people – just as when white people force images onto black people and when males force their own images onto females (p. 3, as cited by Margolis & Shapiro, 1987, p. 20). Gartner (1984) writes, “these images have told us not only what is beautiful and right; they have warned us that the image of disability is ugly – ugly and evil” (p. 3, as cited by Margolis & Shapiro, 1987, p. 20).

Lesley Fiedler’s thoughts from his work *The Tyranny of the Normal* is a fitting conclusion to this section defining disability. Fiedler (1984) boldly skewers the medical community and appurtenant bureaucracy of politics by stating that regardless as to medical advances, the allowed expiration of disabled fetuses is as a result of “a vestigial primitive fear of the abnormal, exacerbated by guilt” (p. 40). While doctors might attempt to assuage their guilt by assuring themselves that she or her was only sparing the child of suffering and parents and society of a financial burden, what is being shown is “how dangerous enforced physiological normality is when the definition of its parameters falls into the hands of politicians and bureaucrats” (Fiedler, 1984. P. 40-1). Fiedler (1984) continues by stating that “it is especially important for us to realize that finally *there are no normals* at a moment when we are striving desperately to eliminate Freaks, to normalize the world” and that “the war against ‘abnormality’ implies a dangerous kind of

politics, which begins with a fear of difference and eventuates in a tyranny of the normal” (p. 42).

### *Defining Disability Studies*

Disability Studies, as an academic function, is a fairly new concept (See Barton 1996, Davis, 2005; Oliver 1983, Swain, *et al*, 2003, as cited by Thomas, 2007, p. 7). Thomas (2007) states that the root of disability studies comes from Emile Durkheim’s work (1964 [1895]) regarding “normal” and “deviant” in regard to social order (p. 11). Talcott Parsons (1951) went further and included “illness, disease, and disability” as a “deviance,” and a contributory force in “social dysfunction” (as cited by Thomas, 2007, p. 11). This is discussed further below. Parsons’ approach faced criticism for the failure to consider that there are some disabilities for which there is no cure or medical solution (Thomas, 2007, p. 18). However, Parsons (1975) answered his critics, stating:

There are many conditions which are, in any given state of the art of medicine, incurable. For them the goal of complete recovery becomes impractical. However, recovery is the obverse of the process of deterioration of health, that is, a level of capacities, and in many of these chronic situations tendencies to such deterioration can be held in check by the proper medically prescribed measures based on sound diagnostic knowledge. (p. 259, as cited by Thomas, 2007, p. 18)

Parsons is stating that even though a person is disabled, that person still has a duty to society: to remain healthy and to contribute to society in whatever way that person can, albeit through the direction of a medical professional (Thomas, 2007, p. 18). Had Parsons also put some duty on society to remove the architectural barriers as well as the social

barriers so as to make it easier for a permanently disabled person to contribute to society, this would come close to fitting into the social model of disability, discussed below.

Garland-Thomson considers Erving Goffman's 1963 book, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, as support for disability studies in that the language signifies the "other" is not "normal," but is deviant (as cited by Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 30-31). Garland-Thomson's (1997) view is that Goffman's stigma theory enforces the concept that disability is not the problem, but rather that the problem for a disabled person is the "inequalities, negative attitudes, misrepresentations, and institutional practices that result from the process or stigmatization" (p.32). Goffman (1963) states that the stigmatized person is seen as "somehow less than human" (p. 3, as cited by Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 32). Stigmatized people have an "undesirable difference," which society sees as a "deviance," and this deviance is handled by society through societal customs, such as discrimination, rejection, stereotypes, etc. (Goffman, 1963, as cited by Garland-Thomson, 1997). Paul Abberly (1993) is also swayed by Goffman's concept of disability, but with an added dimension: Abberly considers the discrimination foisted upon disabled people as a result of his or her stigma, or marker of disability, as being a social control used by "normal" people to prevent a disability as being normalized (p. 109-10). Robert Chubon (1982) also used the stigma verbiage in relation to a social control mechanism, but rather than resistance to the "normalization" of disability, Chubon considers the stigma of disability creates a social barrier to disabled people in regard to social equity.

Jane Campbell and Mike Oliver (1996) consider the book *Stigma: The Experience of Disability* by Paul Hunt as the beginnings of organization for disability rights in the

U.K. (as cited by Thomas, 2007, p 51). *Stigma: The Experience of Disability* contains an unedited collection of twelve essays by disabled people, and started the desire for disabled people in the U.K. to wrest control of their lives from the hands of medicine and to formulate a social understanding of disability (Thomas, 2007, p. 51). In his essay in *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*, Paul Hunt (1966) wrote:

Disabled people often meet prejudice, which expresses itself in discrimination and even *oppression* . . . . Maybe it is invidious to compare our situation with that of racial minorities in any way. The injustice and brutality suffered by so many because of racial tension makes our troubles as disabled people look very small. But I think there is a connection somewhere, since all prejudice springs from the same roots (p. 152-3, as cited by Thomas, 2007, p. 51).

Vic Finklestein picked up the baton of disability studies in the U.K. as a pioneer after Hunt's death and considered Marxism as a theoretical tool through which to view the oppression of disabled people (Thomas, 2007, p. 52). Finklestein (2001) and others in his peer group considered how able-bodied people and social institutions oppressed disabled people by excluding disabled people from employment and education as well as using environmental barriers to ensure non-participation and with forced poverty due through inadequate welfare benefits (p. 5).

Philip Ferguson and Emily Nusbaum (2012) contribute a concise history lesson about disability studies in the U.S. in the article *Disability Studies: What is it and What Difference does it Make?* when they note that "The Society for Disability Studies – the oldest academic organization explicitly dedicated to this area – traces its beginning to

1982” (p. 70-1). Joseph Shapiro (1993) also gives credit to disabled people advocating for disability rights in the 1970s (as cited by Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 71) and the efforts of able-bodied and disabled scholars to listen to and analyze the common language of disabled people and their families (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 71). Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) credit medical sociologist Irving Zola’s newsletter regarding disabilities, which would eventually become *Disability Studies Quarterly*, as the first academic periodical that was devoted to issues that touched disability and the lives of disabled people (p. 71). Starting in the social sciences, but branching into fields such as history, art, humanities, education and many other scholarly fields, Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) state that the Society for Disability Studies definition of “disability studies” is probably a sufficient definition for the field (p. 71). The Society for Disability Studies’ mission states that:

Disability Studies recognizes that disability is a key aspect of human experience, and that the study of disability has important political, social, and economic implications for society as a whole, including both disabled and nondisabled people. Through research, artistic production, teaching and activism, the Society for Disability Studies seeks to augment understanding of disability in all cultures and historical periods, to promote greater awareness of the experiences of disabled people, and to advocate for social change. (Society for Disability Studies, n.d.).

While interesting from a historical perspective, the history of disability studies doesn’t really give anything satisfying to consider in regard to what disability studies “is.”

Garland-Thomson (2005) offers a concept of disability studies in the article *Disabilities and Representation* by stating:

the aim of much disability studies is to reimagine disability, to reveal how the storied quality of disability invents and reinvents the world we share. Disability studies challenges our collective representation of disability, exposing it as an exclusionary and oppressive system rather than the natural and appropriate order of things (p. 523).

She then goes on to describe two representations of disability that she believes are examples of “natural and appropriate.” First, Garland-Thomson (2005) talks about a National Public Radio piece about Thomas Greene Wiggins, who she realized is about a performer in “freak-shows,” known as “Blind Tom” (p. 523). Garland-Thomson (2005) noted that while Wiggins’ blindness was mentioned, he was never referred to as “Blind Tom,” and rather than associate Wiggins with freak-shows, the reporter referred to Wiggins as an “American Composer” (p. 523). Garland-Thomson (2005) says disability rights transformed “Blind Tom,” a freak show performer, into Thomas Greene Wiggins, a major American contributor to music (p. 523). Similarly, Garland-Thomson (2005) mentions two artists with disabilities, Claude Monet, whose move into impressionism was due to his diminished sight, and Chuck Close, who moved from photorealism into a cubist style because of his loss of dexterity due to quadriplegia (p. 253-54). For Garland-Thomson (2005), Monet and Close both challenge representations of disability in that neither artists worked to “overcome their disabilities,” but they changed their styles based on their disabilities, and are both noted artists because of their disabilities, not in spite of their disabilities (p. 524).

Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) argue that there are five core concepts that make scholarly work in disability studies important (p. 72). The first concept discussed is “[t]he study of disability must be social” (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 72). This of course gives rise to the Social Model of Disability (discussed below) in that “disability” is more than an individual diagnosis, but “[d]isability must be studied in its social, cultural, and historical context as much as the personal conditions of impairment and functioning must be studied in their medical and educational contexts” (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 72). Medicine and medical research are of certainly important, too, but research in the field of disability studies can offer a “disability centered” view in a social context (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 72) The second concept is that “[t]he study of disability must be foundational” in that disability studies’ foundation is the “social construction of race, gender, class, and other ways in which we differentiate ourselves from one another” and the way things are classified as “normal” (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 73-4). The third concept is that “[t]he study of disability must be interdisciplinary” in the same manner that other disciplines, such as race and gender studies, draw upon sociological, cultural, and literary representations to explore meaning (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 74). While education for intellectually disabled people and education in medical rehabilitation could be seen as the natural places for disability studies in education, disability studies should not exist as merely educational and medical support for disabled people (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 74). The fourth concept is that “[t]he study of disability should be participatory” in that disabled people should have a hand in the direction of disability studies, from the role of the subjects studied, the types of questions asked, and the people researching and analyzing the answers (Ferguson & Nusbaum,

2012, p. 74). Certainly not to suggest that able-bodied researchers have no place in a disability studies program, but the under-representation of disabilities in academia dictates that disability studies scholars should advocate for participation by disabled people (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 74) The fifth concept is that “[t]he study of disability must be values-based” in that a disability studies scholar’s zeal for advocacy and critique of the more traditional “medical model of disability” should not cause a researcher to dismiss someone’s real need for education or rehabilitation, even though formal systems of “special education” and “rehabilitation” can be seen as systems that have contributed to the “oppression and pathologization of children and adults with disabilities” (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 74).

In the midst of the theories and the concepts of disability studies, the question still remains, who cares? As with the medical model of disability, a disability was considered something to be “fixed” by medicine or ameliorated by institutions and accessibility (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 75). Research by disability scholars has revealed the “construct that is labeled ‘disability’ as multi-faceted and complex (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 75). By more engagement and research in the field of disability studies, “disability” becomes more of a shared experience, and as people age and inevitably become disabled (if he or she lives long enough), a natural part of life (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 75).

### Classic Disability Representation Theories

#### *In Literature*

The overwhelmingly typical representation of disability in literature is that the disability acts as a metaphor – characters that seek to elicit pity from the reader or

disabled characters whose bodies represent disabled minds and are therefore to be feared or pitied (See Fiedler 1982; Garland-Thomson 1997; Garland-Thomson 2005; Kent, 1987; Kriegel, 1987; Margolis & Shapiro, 1987; Rogers, 1978; Thurer, 1980; among many others). Garland-Thomson (1997) laments that often, disabled characters are so removed from reality as to render the character a “freak,” whose sole contribution is “a single stigmatizing trait” (p. 11). Managing daily interactions in reality as a disabled person is never simple, because a visible disability dominates the interaction with a “normal” person (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.12). Does the “normal” person feel fear, pity, repulsion? – none of which are socially acceptable responses; should he or she offer assistance? acknowledge the disability? is this person disabled, handicapped, handi-capable? (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.12). Similarly, will anxiety regarding the prospect of rejection by the “normal” person be too great to continue the relationship beyond an initial meeting? (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 12-3). One of many problems with a one-dimensional representation of a disability in literature is that disability covers so many variations among people that one of the standard disability signifiers; “wheelchair user,” “blind,” or “deaf;” is false (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 13). At any rate, disabled characters are found only in the margins, or made into a spectacle the writer wants to enforce in the narrative (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 9).

Henri-Jaques Stiker (1997) notes that in the Old Testament of The Bible, disabled people carried the legal designation of unclean, and could never become priests (p. 24, as cited by Quayson, 2007, p. 5). Cain was “marked,” implying that the consequence for sin is disfigurement (Thurer, 1980, p. 13). Greek society saw disabilities as punishment (Stiker, 1997, p. 39-46, as cited by Qayson, 2007, p.5), while Greek gods were idealized

superhuman forms (Fiedler, 1984, p. 41). Haiphaistos, an Olympian god, was portrayed as “lame,” and used as a joke (Fiedler, 1982, p. 57). In the middle ages, disability vacillated between the realm of monstrosity and charity, with various disabilities seen as a sign of God’s wrath (Quayson, 2007, p.6-7). As literature reaches the Victorian Era, fear of a disabled character start to emerge as a theme (Fiedler, 1982, p. 64), and the title character in Shakespeare’s *Richard III* gives rise to the idea that a character’s physical disability must surely evidence a malignant heart and mind (Fiedler, 1982, p. 64). That characterization shows up often: in Dickens’ *The Old Curiosity Shop*, as Quilp; in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, as Captain Ahab; in Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, as Long John Silver; in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, as Chillingworth; in Hugo’s *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, as Quasimodo, among countless other classic literary works (Fiedler, 1982, p. 64-5).

In addition to the characterizations of disability as a curse, a monstrosity, and something to be feared, the disabled character as pitiable and sad is a common theme. Fiedler (1982) points to Tiny Tim in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, as well as medical miracles in *Heidi* and *The Secret Garden* as evidence of pitiable disabled characters (p. 67-8). However, Fiedler (1982) notes that in the middle of the pity shown, there is a subtext of fear, too, in that the disabilities are so unfortunate that the miracle cures make disabilities go away (p. 68). Howard Margolis and Arthur Shapiro (1987) also consider the pity mechanism at play as disabled people are often depicted as “receivers” of pity and charity regarding the disabled character’s relationships with the able-bodied (p. 20).

In a rebuttal to an article by Lesley Fiedler in the academic periodical *Salmagundi*, Paul Robinson (1982) states his belief that the overwhelming emotion in literature toward disabled characters is pity (p. 74). Robinson continues:

[G]reat literature reflects the more deeply felt responses, not merely to disability but to all significant human experiences . . . Richard III - if I may put the matter somewhat baldly - is about ambition and inhumanity, while *Moby Dick* is about revenge, megalomania, and the quest for transcendence. These works are about other things as well, but what they are most emphatically not about is the problem of being a hunchback or a pegleg (Robinson, 1982, p. 76-7).

Robinson (1982) says the disabilities are symbolic of the inward states Shakespeare and Melville were seeking to portray (p. 78). That explanation is interesting but does little to blunt Fiedler's characterization that a visible disability is evidence of a malignant heart and mind.

Margolis and Shapiro (1987) agree with the disabled body equating to disabled mind trope when referencing author Somerset Maugham's literary classic, *Of Human Bondage* (p. 19). Regarding the character Phillip, Margolis and Shapiro (1987) state that Maugham used that literary device with the character Phillip, whose clubfoot is the cause of his "confused and warped personality" (p. 19).

Leonard Kriegel (1987) certainly sees the pity and fear, but tempers that with a dose of compassion (p. 32). In addition to the pity and fear, Kriegel (1987) adds a couple of other characterizations, choosing "Demonic Cripple" to describe Richard III and Captain Ahab, turning Tiny Tim into what he calls a "Charity Cripple," and then adding

“Realistic Cripple” to the lexicon by describing the character Berthold Lindau from William Howell’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Kriegel (1987) also offers a take on the “supercrip” image, the “Survivor Cripple” in the form of the great character William Einhorn of Chicago from Saul Bellow’s picaresque *The Adventures of Augie March*. Kriegel’s (1987) sage words regarding disabilities and literature is that “the world of the crippled and disabled is strange and dark, and it is held up to judgment by those who live in fear of it” (p.33). While those are solely male characterizations of disability, it turns out that female characters get the same treatment as male characters (Kent, 1987). Bertha Plummer, a blind woman in Charles Dickens’s book *Cricket on the Hearth*, is the recipient of charity and pity, while James Joyce’s Gertie McDowell, who is “lame,” from the book *Ulysses*, displays bitter envy (Kent, 1987, p. 49).

Ato Quayson (2007), in his book *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*, has a bit of a different view about disability representations in literature when he states that “aesthetic nervousness is seen when the dominant protocols of representation within literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability” (p. 15). The basic level of “aesthetic nervousness” is the tension inherent when a disabled character interacts with a “normal” character (Quayson, 2007, p. 15) However, most narratives go beyond the basic level to into “the disposition of symbols and motifs,” “dramatic perspective,” to the highest level of “aesthetic nervousness,” which no longer occupies the text, but operates between the reader and the text addressing the reader’s status (Quayson, 2007, p. 15). Quayson (2007) says the “short-circuits” that cause “aesthetic nervousness” in a text come from the author’s representations of disability (p. 15).

Garland-Thomson points out some instances in modern literature where a disability is represented with power, in particular, Eva Peace, a character in Toni Morrison's 1973 novel *Sula*. Peace's leg is amputated by being run over by a train (it is not clear if the amputation was an accident or purposeful) and uses the proceeds of her insurance and thereby feeds her family (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 116). Garland-Thomson (1997) sees a difference between Peace and Melville's Captain Ahab in that Ahab is confined by his amputation and obsession with *Moby Dick*, while Peace's amputation sets her free from poverty (p. 116).

#### *In Visual Arts*

Visual representations of objects certainly pre-dated written representations, and these visual representations are not immune from stereotyping and de-humanizing disabled people. Fiedler (1984) points out that art galleries are brimming with paintings of "Freaks" from Goya and Velasquez, to Currier and Ives, who exalted one of P.T. Barnum's sideshow stars, General Tom Thumb (p. 41).

There is a more than a century-long affair between society and "freak shows" (see Fiedler, 1984; Garland-Thomson 1997). In 1822, Tono Maria, a native Brazilian, was displayed without any cultural context except that she was as an example of everything a Western woman was not: sexually deviant and unrestrained (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 56). People with congenital defects were displayed as to allow "normal" people a way to diffuse their own anxieties and inhibitions (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 56). P.T. Barnum's exhibitions served to challenge the audience – how do these bodily disabilities fit into cultural definitions of "people" (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 58-9). Barnum's first exhibition, Joice Heath, was the antithesis of the able-bodied white male ideal: an old,

toothless, crippled black woman whose oddity prevented humanization, and existed as “pure text” (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 59). Barnum even continued the dehumanization of Heath after death, as her autopsy was a ticketed public event (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 60). Freak shows turned bodies into text to be deciphered according to the needs and desires of the audiences (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 60). As such, freak shows also satisfied the need of the audience to affirm “normal” and “other” (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 65). Freaks as entertainment in the guise of freak shows was a fairly typical activity (Fiedler, 1984, p. 41).

In addition to paintings and freak shows, there are many representations of disabilities of all kinds in films. An early example of disabled representations in films is the 1932 Todd Browning film, *Freaks*, which is the subject of a multitude of film documentaries, academic articles, theses, and dissertations. *Freaks* varied representations of disability goes from visual oddity, to pity, fear, amazement, repulsion, and finally criminal conspiracy when the performers seemingly brutalize and terrorize the able-bodied starlet as a means of extracting revenge. The film has been banned, re-edited, restored, and exists not only as a cult classic, but also as a powerful relic of the representation of disabilities. Films with varying representations of disabilities, go from the popular movies, like the above-mentioned *Freaks*, to the surreal art films of Fredrico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman (Fiedler, 1984, p. 41).

Not terribly long after Browning’s film, a very different and yet important film confronted varied disabilities in director William Wyler’s brilliant and somewhat flawed masterpiece from 1946, *The Best Years of Our Lives*. With that film, American producers and consumers of culture not only had a means to confront worries about men coming

back from World War II, but also were offered a template to resolve potential problems with men reintegrating into typical American life (Gerber, 1994, p. 545). Harold Russell's portrayal of Homer Parrish was groundbreaking in that a disabled actor was cast as a disabled character, an amputee as a result of fighting in World War II, but the tried and true stereotypes of "pity and fear" would transfer from literature directly into this film (Gerber, 1994, p. 546).

In addition to pity and fear, the "super cripp" motif (see above) is used when Wyler shows Homer Parrish accomplishing tasks with the hooks he has for hands, such as target shooting, opening a pack of cigarettes, among other "tricks" (Gerber, 1994, p. 552, p. 560). On one hand, the movie is excellent for the realistic portrayal of disability, yet the portrayal also seeks pity for Parrish, too (Gerber, 1994, p. 560). Parrish brings into focus how Wyler played on the audience's fear of the other through the classic representations of disability in the film (Gerber, 1994, p. 560). In addition to the fear of being disabled in the same way Homer Parrish is, the character also is menacing to the audience because of repeated, yet unpredictable, bouts of anger (Gerber, 1994, p. 560). While the film has a subtext of enforcing dominant culture in traditional roles for women and men, further analysis of the film is really beyond the scope of this project.

Paul K. Longmore (1987) makes note of the large number of disabilities represented in films, but the representations follow along with literary stereotypes: horror film "monsters," criminals, disabled veterans, among other stereotypes (p. 65). Longmore (1987) considers the disabled "monster" stereotype to be a play on the disabled body, evil mind stereotype with a twist of "extremism" in the form of a twisted and ugly face or some gross bodily deformity, with the only solution being death of the "monster" (p. 68-

9). Longmore (1987) believes the stereotype of a disabled person as seeking suicide to escape a disabled life as a parallel to the monster stereotype in that the disabilities caused a loss of humanity and a loss of control, and the only remedy is the death of the disabled person (p. 69). Longmore (1987) considers the adjustment to a disability trope developed with the large number of disabled U.S. soldiers returning from World War II (p. 71). Often the adjustment to disability can cross into the “supercrip” stereotype when the disabled person takes his or her new life and does something extraordinary like playing a sport or driving a car; the problem with being disabled isn’t discrimination and stigmatization from society, but rather the person’s own acceptance of his or her disability (Longmore, 1987, p. 72).

Longmire (1987) writes that the acceptance dramas serve a larger social function: reinforcing the notion that people can cope and adapt to anything with the right frame of mind (p. 74). If a disabled person can succeed, imagine how well you, the able-bodied viewer, can succeed (Longmire, 1987, p. 74). In addition, the adjustment stereotypes make adapting to life in an able-bodied world no longer about prejudice or discrimination from society, but about the individual disabled person (Longmire, 1987, p 74).

### *Educating About Disabilities*

“The disabled have a bad literary press,” states Sheri Thurer (1980, p. 12). Most often, associating disabled characters as malignant stems from folk tales in a child’s culture (Thurer, 1980, p. 12). From early education, children are given the burden to parse the spate of negative representations of disability and to judge them as correct or false, which is seemingly difficult since children “easily” accept the negative representations of disability presented by literature (Barnes, Berrigan, & Biklen, 1978;

Schroedel, 1979 as cited by Margolis & Shapiro, 1987). The classic literary conventions regarding literary characters are not hidden or nuanced as to make them accessible to children readers, so what is signaled is “deformity equals immorality” (Thurer, 1980, p. 13).

In the opposition, being a good person is rewarded, too, as the “ugly ducking becomes a swan; the frog, a king; and the beast, a prince” (Thurer, 1980, p. 14). Fairy tales from classic literature, when used in an educational forum, transmit values to children, as well as serving as models for actions by children (Baskin, 1975, as cited by Margolis & Shapiro, 1987, p. 18). Child educators do not only have an opportunity to correct stereotypes promulgated by classic fairly tales, but some believe child educators have a duty to point out the injustices disabled people carry because of those stereotypes (Margolis & Shapiro, 1987, p. 18).

Margolis and Shapiro (1987) suggest that when teachers are educating with classic literature and fairy tales that use classic misrepresentations of disabled people that teachers should ask three questions of the students: 1) is the character a person in the story, or is the disability portrayed being used as a literary device? 2) is the disabled character’s interaction with others mutually beneficial? and 3) what is the origin of stereotypical characters and devices in literature? (p. 19-21).

While classic literature for children often carries the same stereotypes and metaphors as mature literature, public television for children has been a better outlet historically, as *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, *Sesame Street*, and *Zoom*, are classic children’s programing that had disabled children as guests (Wagner, 1975). *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood’s* reasoning for the inclusion of disabled guests is that the

inclusion of disabled children supports the show's "values and attitudes and acceptance to children" (Wagner, 1975). Fred Rogers's goal was to have an influence in children regarding disabled people, in that a disability is just a "difference among differences in people" (Wagner, 1975). Other literature from the era suggests that "[w]e are beginning to move in this area of using television to foster positive attitudes toward the handicapped" (Liebert, 1975. P. 66).

### Medical vs. Social Models of Disability

#### *Medical Model*

At its most basic, the medical model of disability portrays disability solely as pathology to be cured (see Dirth & Branscombe, 2017; Finkelstein, 1997; Gabel & Peters, 2004; Hahn, 1987; Oliver, 2004). The World Health Organization (WHO) combined its treatment of disability with illness and disease in 1980, naming it a "medical model" (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000). Harlan Hahn (1987) states that disabled people were often defined from a medical perspective, with medical solutions to disability as being the only solution (p. 181). Michael Oliver (2004) agrees with Hahn's assessment, but goes further by stating that "the medical view of disability tends to regard disabled people as 'having something wrong with them' and hence the source of the problem" (p. 20). In essence, person's mental or physical limitation is why he or she cannot integrate and function in society (Oliver, 2004, p. 20).

A problematic aspect of the medical model of disability is highlighted by Jennifer Brooks (2014) who argues that the medical model of disability is so focused on the individual that the preternatural focus tends to distance any social responsibility to include disabled people; if a disability is caused by an individual's choice, then the

decision to integrate should be solved by the individual, too (p. 5). That line of thinking validates discrimination toward disabled people and dehumanizes a disabled person (Brooks, 2014, p. 6). This dehumanizing aspect can be seen when people are grouped into categories by a condition (paraplegic, schizophrenic, autistic, disabled), which relegates disabled people to “terminological rubbish bins into which all the important things about us as people get thrown away” (Brisenden, 1986, p. 174). The medical model’s focus on a disability as being an individual problem can cause a disabled person to blame his or herself as the cause of the disability as well as being responsible for finding the right combination of medical treatments for the disability; in addition, the individual problem presented by the medical model might decrease social support for disabled individuals, too (Dirth & Brascombe, 2017, p. 434). As such, a key concept that is bundled with the medical model is blaming the victim for his or her disability (Thomas, 2007, p. 19). Funk (1987) also sees a negative toll on disabled individuals in dehumanizing disability, because while the disability and care are individualized, a disabled person loses agency regarding a cure, as that is completely the realm of the medical community, and that loss of agency for disabled people continues into aspects of a disabled person’s personal life (p. 13).

Another problem with the medical model is highlighted by Simon Brisenden (1986), who writes that “[t]he medical model of disability is one rooted in an undue emphasis on clinical diagnosis, the very nature of which is destined to lead to a partial and inhibiting view of the disabled individual” (p. 173). Julie Smart (2009) agrees as she argues that the medical model of disability:

essentially treats all individuals with the same diagnosis with identical treatment plans, regardless of differences in the individuals' needs, resources, or assets. This tendency to see the individual as a diagnosis has led disability scholars to term the Biomedical Model “diagnosis-driven” rather than “individual focused” (p. 4).

In the book *Sociologies of Disability and Illness: Contested Ideas in Disability Studies and Medical Sociology*, Carol Thomas analyzes the differences between how medical sociology and disability studies consider disability and disabled people. Thomas (2007) notes Emile Durkheim’s juxtaposition of the social deviant with “normal” cases in regarding to social order (p. 11). American Sociologist Talcott Parsons thrust disability into Durkheim’s concept of social deviance in 1951 (Thomas, 2007, p. 11). William Cockerham (2004) argues that disability as a deviant behavior is not a mere statistical variation from average but carries a judgment: conforming to the social norm is positive; deviation is not (p. 142-43, as cited by Thomas, 2007, p. 11). That characterization of disability survives into current medical sociology (Thomas, 2007, p. 12).

In mentioning Parsons, there is a possibility for a sub-model, possibly a precursor to the medical model of disability, the “economic model.” Parsons (1951) is a structural functionalist in his approach to society, and as such he saw society as an interconnected web of social structures, requiring healthy, “normal” workers to have stable families, to work to build the economy, and to keep the social system healthy and functioning (as cited by Thomas, 2007, p. 17). In that regard, the social system depends on limiting and managing illness, which requires medical professionals and the institution of medicine (Thomas, 2007 p. 17). When a person is occupying Parsons’ “sick role,” there are two

rights: 1) to be free of social sanction because of that person's illness, and 2) to escape blame for illness; and two duties: 1) to get well as fast as possible, and 2) to seek a doctor and to follow the doctor's orders (Thomas, 2007 p. 17).

Finkelstein (1993) also gives some weight to the "economic model" by pointing out that a person's participation in creating wealth was radically different when manufacture was primarily in a person's home on a small scale with personal mechanical devices that offered individualized accommodation versus the machinery of mass production, which did not allow for personalization, but rather was specifically designed for any "normal" person off the street to operate (p. 12). Being "normal" became the characteristic necessary for employment (Finkelstein, 1993, p. 12). Differentiating a person's status as either idle or torpid and unwilling to work versus legitimately impaired and "unable" to work would, of course, require the judgment of a medical professional, and would give rise to the medial model of disability (Finkelstein, 1993, p. 12-3). In the same vein, Hahn (1987) sees the emphasis on the capacity to work over other life activities as making "unwarranted and untenable assumptions about the linkage between impairments and productivity (p. 182).

Ironically, society typically considers an economic disadvantage to be 1) the lack of ability, or 2) the presence of a prejudice (Abberly, 1993, p. 111). But society is prejudiced against disabled people because 1) disabled people are typically lacking economically and 2) society removes any power a disabled person may have had prior to a disability (Abberly, 1993, p. 111). Therefore, the lack of power and economic standing regarding disabled people arises from society's prejudice against disabled people (Abberly, 1993, p. 111). When one adds the effects of economic disadvantage and lack of

power to the lack of resources society allocates to care, living expenses, the economic model becomes a focus for many disabled people's lives (Abberly, 1993, p. 111-2). Funk (1987) laments that the lack of power and economic status is seen as a natural result of having a disability (p. 7). Funk (1987) also is quick to also argue that "[p]eople who are disabled have historically been treated as objects of pity and fear . . . who are neither expected nor willing to participate in or contribute to organized society" (p. 9).

In closing this look at the medical model of disability, here is this gem from Fiedler (1984):

[W]e are approaching with alarming rapidity a future in which the rich and privileged will have as one more, ultimate privilege, the hope of a surgically, chemically, hormonally induced and preserved normality – with the promise of immortality by organ transplant just over the horizon. And the poor (who, we are assured on good authority, we have always with us) will be our sole remaining Freaks. (p. 42)

### *Social Model*

While Parsons's influence on medical sociology was critical in placing disabled people in the position of relying on medicine to return them to health and supporting the social system, Goffman (1963) was more concerned with interactions between people that carried a social stigma, such as a disability, with "normal" people (p. 23, as cited by Thomas, 2007, p. 23). Goffman found that "normal" people showed discomfort when socially engaged with the stigmatized, and the stigmatized people carried the burden of adjusting in an effort to make "normal" people comfortable (Thomas, 2007, p. 23). (1997). Garland-Thomson (1997) notes that the extra effort from disabled people is not

necessarily to make a “normal” person feel comfortable, but more for a disabled person to be considered “fully human” by the “normal” person (p. 13). So much so that disabled people must approach meetings with “normal” people with “charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort” (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 13) Only if the disabled person is successful in blunting the effect of a disability can the relationship move past the surface (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 13).

The efforts made by the stigmatized to manage interaction with “normal” people included removing themselves from social encounters completely or disguising/covering a disability to pass as “normal,” which Goffman saw as unfair burden affecting a stigmatized person’s sense of self (Thomas, 2007, p. 23). Morris (1993), reinforces that idea some 25 years later when she writes:

Going out in public so often takes courage. How many of us find that we can’t dredge up the strength to do it day after day, week after week, year after year, a lifetime of rejection and revulsion? It is not only physical limitations that restrict us to our homes and those whom we know. It is the knowledge that each entry into the public world will be dominated by stares, by condescension, by pity and by hostility (p. 104).

I have had similar feelings; the able-bodied stare is a part of my life some 50 years after Goffman’s research. In a similar vein, Paul Abberly (1993) states, “[I]f disabled people display psychological abnormalities, this is because they have been socialized into such traits as a result of the ways in which society meets, or fails to meet, our needs” (p. 108).

For some, the birth of the social model of disability comes from meetings between two groups, Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) and The Disability Alliance (Alliance) from a published meeting transcript from 1975 named *The Fundamental Principles of Disability* (see Barnes, 2003; Dewsbury et al., 2004; Gabel & Peters, 2004; Light, 2001; Murphy, 1987). The UPIAS (1976) publication states, “it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (p. 14). The theory of the social model of disability considers problems a disabled person is having negotiating life and the environment and environmental structures as the means of including or excluding disabled people, so that society and the framing of disability is responsible for a person’s disability and not the individual (see Barnes, 2003; Mays, 2006; Oliver 1986; Rothman, 2003; Tregaskis, 2002). At the heart of disability being considered a construct of society is the idea that the dominant culture sets the parameters of “normal” and “deviant” (see Barnes, 2003; Dewsbury et al., 2004; Tregaskis, 2002; Turner et al., 1996). In Hahn’s (1987) view, “[T]he sociopolitical view stresses the role of the environment . . . and requires an examination of the architectural, institutional, and attitudinal environment encountered by disabled persons” (p. 182). With yet one more quote to fix the basic definition of the “social model” of disabilities, Evan Kemp (1981) writes, “[B]arriers to employment, transportation, housing, and recreation can be more devastating and wasteful of our lives than the diseases from which we suffer” (p. 23)

Rather than a specific moment where the skies opened and the social model was born, the social model of disabilities was developed out of graduate courses for social

workers at the University of Kent in the 1980s (Oliver, 2004). Oliver (2004), in a prime quote regarding the social model of disabilities states,

In the broadest sense, the social model of disability is about nothing more complicated than a clear focus on the economic, environmental and cultural barriers encountered by people who are viewed by others as having some form of impairment – whether physical, sensory or intellectual. The barriers disabled people encounter include inaccessible education systems, working environments, inadequate disability benefits, discriminatory health and social support services, inaccessible transport, houses and public buildings and amenities, and the devaluing of disabled people through negative images in the media – films, television and newspapers (p. 23).

Certainly the physical environment, or rather accommodations for disabled people in the physical environment in the form of ramps, audible signals at stop-lights, braille on plaques identifying buildings and rooms, sign language interpreters among others, are ways in which society has altered the environment and are examples of the social model in action. As mentioned in the section regarding the ADA above, laws mandate these accommodations, and while not evenly enforced, this is still a societal action to accommodate disabilities. Much of the continuing issues with the social model come from older buildings not retrofitting access, as often building owners think that the ADA does not apply to a building because it was completed prior to the ADA's passage, which is not the case. ADA violations for existing construction are not policed by a government organization, however – a disabled person must take action on his or her own. Often the

only remedy is to file legal action, because after you write a company a letter and request an accommodation, from personal experience, the letter might be read, but is then summarily thrown into the garbage. Certainly, there is no better way to become a pariah in a city than to file legal claims against small businesses. Eventually, the costs of fighting an accommodation exceed the cost of making the requested accommodation, and alterations are made. That is the easy part of the social model. The part of the social model that affects disabled people the most are the economic and cultural barriers.

Paul Abberly (1993) bemoans that while architectural barriers can be altered easily, the human needs of disabled people are met in “inappropriate and disempowering ways” (p. 111). It is possible that when people view a disability through the social model that some of the stereotypes about disabilities and disabled people can be ameliorated, as the social model does promote awareness of discrimination in environmental and physical barriers, and hopefully that carries on into awareness of structural discrimination, too, which could lead people to support public policies that seek to reduce inequalities for disabled people (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017).

Oliver (1993) suggests that *everyone* can play a part in twisting the social model of disability by considering how his or her business or social organization contributed to the social model of disability by examining environmental factors and whether a space is navigable by people with various mobility impairments, examining an organization's presentation of information and examining how the information is available for someone with a sight impairment, and the how the services provided may be utilized by able-bodied people as well as impaired people (p. 66). Oliver's (1993) largest plea is that

research regarding disabilities should not be performed without input and oversight from disabled people, to insure that the true experience of disability is represented (p. 66).

Oliver (2004) details criticisms of the social model, beginning with the idea that while the social model addresses disabilities as a collective, the realities of an individual's experience is ignored, especially the subjective experiences of "pain" stemming from an impairment or a disability (p. 24-5). In addition, some consider that the social model isn't able to incorporate other social divisions, such as race, gender, age, sexuality, etc. (Oliver, 2004, p. 25). Another criticism of the social model is that architectural and environmental barriers get the spotlight and the social and cultural position of disabled people as the "other" is relegated to the background (Oliver, 2004, p. 26). Brooks (2004) also points out that removing a barrier does not suddenly cause a person's disability to vaporize, which stands in this category of social model critique (p. 8). Oliver's (2004) personal criticism of the social model is that "too much time has been spent discussing it rather than attempting to use it to produce social and political change" (p. 30).

Eli Clare's (2001) criticism is in the disability as collective vein, as he argues that the social model considers the collective injustice of disability and discards a person's relationship with his or her body and how that might influence an individual's oppression. Claire (2001) states, "[T]here are disability thinkers who can talk all day about the body as metaphor and symbol but never mention flesh and blood, bone and tendon—never even acknowledge their own bodies" such that the social model ignores individual experiences, such as the able-bodied stare, chronic pain, body shaming, and other individualized experiences stemming from a disability (p. 364). Tom Shakespeare

and Nicholas Watson (1997) push for more inclusion in the social model when they write that agency and structure should be combined, which is also hinted at by Oliver above. Others also point out that bringing daily lives of disabled people front and center is crucial when social problems are analyzed on a theoretical level as individual struggles can be overlooked (see Anderson & Kitchin, 2000; Clare, 2001; Dewsbury et al., 2004; Ferri & Gregg, 1998).

Of course, one model alone cannot stand for the myriad disabled experiences. Oliver admits that the individual is ignored by the social model, many other scholars argue that the “body” is not even considered by the social model (see Butler, 1993; Hughes and Paterson 1997; Lang 2001; Siebers 2001). Robert Lang (2001) points out that the definition of “disability” definition is flawed, too, in that the inability to read or write would be a disability in an industrial society, but someone so situated in a rural society would have the capability to fully participate in society, and therefore not oppressed at all by a disability.

### *Alternate Models*

From a disability studies frame, there are many emerging alternative models of disability. While this project is not about models of disability theory, some of these should be noted. Susan Gabel and Susan Peters (2004) researched and support a disabilities theory deemed *resistance theory* that combines individual experiences of disabled people in concert with community resistance and action. Gabel and Peters (2004) suggest that images that portray disabled in ways that challenge the public’s perception of disabilities, such as a topless female cancer survivor with visible mastectomy scars or a paraplegic dancing on Lofstrand/forearm crutches, is a form of

resistance. Gabel and Peters (2004) offer that the 2001 addition of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) in a visible wheelchair to the FDR memorial is an example of resistance theory in action in that the addition shows a disabled person in an identity of power (p. 594). Resistance theory “functions as a way for disabled people to push against dominance, while also attempting to pull society into disabled people’s way of thinking” (Gabel & Peters, 2004, p. 594-5).

Another proposed model is advocated by John Swain and Sally French (2000), the *affirmation model*, which they have defined as, “a non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of life style and life experience of being impaired and disabled” (Swain & French, 2000, p. 569). Unpacking that word salad a bit, the concept of the affirmation model is it addresses disability and what that means in terms of a disabled person’s life and identity (Swain & French, 2000, p. 570). The threat to many typical people is that a disabled person can live life on life’s terms, is still happy to be alive and strive while not ignoring a disability, and proudly identifying as disabled (Swain and French, 2000). Disabled people actively refute a typical person’s concept of “normal,” and this rejection of the dominant cultural view leads to society with true diversity, “without structural, environmental or attitudinal barriers” (Swain & French, 2000, p. 580). Colin Cameron’s (2008) critique of the affirmation model is that promotes the patent differences between disabled and able-bodied people so greatly that it justifies discrimination based on ability.

Brooks (2014) contends the most suitable model for disabilities combines the individual’s impairment with social construction based on acceptance deemed able-

bodied acceptance, or how a person is accepted by society is based in “*performance of normality*” (p. 10-1). The severity of an individual’s impairment, how a person’s society is structured, and how closely a disabled person can conform to able-bodied standards all play a part, such that individuals that can “pass” as able-bodied or seem less-disabled than their reality would have more able-bodied acceptance (Brooks, 2014, p. 11). This model seems to be a gimp’s way of code-switching.

### Television’s Representation of Disability

Here is a fitting quote to begin this section:

[T]here are two issues here: First, should actors with disabilities get priority in playing disabled characters? Answer: Intentional inclusion of actors with disabilities in auditioning for these parts should be a given.

After that, it's up to the casting director. The second — and more pervasive — issue is what effect these characters and images have on the public's attitudes about disability (Gilmer, 2010, p. 4).

Like the examples of stereotypes in literature, paintings and film that are explored above, television also has a tendency to deal with the same stereotypes (See Barnes, 1992; Longmore, 1987). This description of a television movie from 1969 featuring a mentally delayed actor is interesting for the inclusion of a disabled actor, if not shocking for the language:

Billy Schulman, a 13 year[-]old mentally retarded youngster with the mental age of an 8 year old, is the star of Hallmark's Hall of Fame drama, *Teacher, Teacher* . . . children with mental retardation can learn, and can

use these learnings to cope with life's problems encountered outside of home and school (Mentally Retarded Boy Stars in TV Drama, p. 403).

With that as a background, an early content analysis of television representation of television between 1968 and 1978 showed a marked increase, with 149 television programs with a disability representation in 1968 compared to 256 in 1978 (Byrd, et al, 1980, p. 323). The numbers in 1978 are attributed to PBS, with the partial explanation being that “their traditional concern with public interest and service programming” (Byrd, et al, 1980, p. 323).

In *Disabling Imagery and the Media: An Exploration of the Principals for Media Representations of Disabled People*, Colin Barnes expands the classic pity, disabled outside = disabled inside, inspiration, and super gimp stereotypes found in other media. Barnes (1992) sees the British charity television shows *Children in Need*, and *Telethon*, as examples of the disabled person as pitiable or pathetic stereotype, with the goal of making the audiences feel proud to donate money to help (p. 15). In addition, Barnes (1992) considers televised news images of disabled people in hospitals to perpetuate the myth that disability equals illness (p. 16). Barnes (1992) notes disabled people being portrayed as victims of violence as a stereotype, and states that a disabled character in a television show is three times as likely to end up dead by the end of the show, mostly enduring a violent death at the hands of law enforcement due to the disabled character has committed a crime (p. 20). Disabled people as sinister and evil as a stereotype are exemplified by the television show *The Fugitive*, where the entire series revolves around finding a one-armed murderer. (Barnes, 1992, p. 23). Barnes (1992) sees the disabled person as atmosphere or curio stereotype on television when television shows use a

disabled representation to add impact to a mysterious or depraved scene, reducing disabled people to oddities (p. 24). Barnes (1992) sees the disabled person as super cripp stereotype on television in the detective characters Robert T. Ironside, who is a paraplegic, but uses his extraordinary mind and logic skills to solve crimes, and Mike Longstreet, who is blind, but is somehow gifted super-human hearing. (p. 26) Barnes (1992) also points out the innumerable news stories of disabled people that triumph despite disability (p. 26). Barnes (1992) points out the children's cartoons are filled with the disabled person as an object of ridicule stereotype in the form of Quincy Magoo, an elderly, bumbling person with a vision problem (p. 27). Paul Longmore (1987) adds to Barnes's stereotype by pointing out that the characters Elmer Fudd and Porky Pig both have speech impediments, and that the character Dopey is portrayed as mentally delayed (p. 65).

Barnes (1992) lists the disabled person as their own worst and only enemy as a popular television stereotype in that it portrays disabled people as able to overcome difficulties if the disabled person would stop engaging in self-pity and meet a challenge with courage and strength (p. 29), often as the result of a "get tough" type of speech delivered by a conveniently able-bodied family member or friend (Longmore, 1987, p. 70). Barnes (1992) television example for that stereotype is the made for BBC movie, *Journey to Knock* (p. 30). The disabled person as burden stereotype, Barnes (1992) writes, comes from the idea that disabled people on their own are helpless, but with the help of a supportive able-bodied person, the disabled person can be "normal" (p. 30). Barnes (1992) uses the BBC televised play, *Keeping Tom Nice* as an example of the stereotype, in that a family is destroyed when Tom's father kills himself because of his

abusive relationship with Tom (p. 31). The disabled person as sexually abnormal stereotype comes from the public's typically incorrect presumptions about sexuality and disability, and is displayed in the BBC television dramas, *Goodbye Cruel World*, and *A Time to Dance*, where able-bodied men resort to adultery because of their wives' disabilities (Barnes, 1992, p. 33). The disabled person as incapable of participating full in community life stereotype is one of omission, in that in television films and dramas "less than one and a half percent of all characters portrayed" are disabled (Cumberbatch and Negrene, 1992, p. 136 as cited by Barnes, 1992, p. 34). Barnes (1992) last television stereotype for disabled person is the disabled person as normal, using British TV dramas *The Trials of Rosie O'Neil*, and *War of the World* as exemplary of this stereotype (p. 36). Barnes (1992) states that this is welcomed but has the chance for discrimination in that the characters are "largely one-dimensional" and don't necessarily reflect the true experiences of disability (p. 37).

Longmore (1987) states that there are plenty of disabled characters on television, as well as in films. (p. 65). A reoccurring theme in dramatic television is that the "star" character in television often will often incur a disabling injury or condition, but generally only temporarily (Longmore, 1987, p. 65). Longmore (1987) also mentions that disabilities, in life and in media, are often not noticed or recognized because people are anxious and scared the person his or herself will become disabled (p. 66). Longmore (1987) notes television shows that fit into the stereotypes described by Barnes: *Hawaii Five-O's Hookman* episode, for instance, where a double-amputee sniper is seeking to kill the police detective that foiled a bank robbery in which the sniper was involved, causing the would-be sniper to lose his hands (p. 67). Dr. Miguelito P. Loveless, from the

show *Wild Wild West*, was a “criminal genius” in the body of a “hunchbacked dwarf” (Longmore, 1987, p. 66) Longmore (1987) makes the claim that disabled criminals in television serve to enforce prejudices against disabled people: “disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their ‘fate’; disabled people resent the nondisabled and would, if they could, destroy them” (p. 66).

It is possible that the ultimate ideals of disability representation stereotypes and embodiments of the medical model are *The Six-Million Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman*, whose lives would be profoundly different without modern medical technology (Thurer, 1980, p. 13). *The Six-Million Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman* are prime areas for the cultural significance of the medical model of disabilities – both characters are reliant on medical technology for life. Medical advances not only saved their lives, but enabled them with super-human abilities; super crips run amok.

*The Six Million Dollar Man* started as a made for television movie, based on the Martin Caidin novel *Cyborg*, and aired from 1974 – 1978 on the television network, ABC (Jenkins, 2011, p. 93). The television program’s opening montage features actual footage of a spectacular crash of a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) experiment, and contains the classic quote, “gentlemen, we can rebuild him . . . we have the capacity to create the world’s first bionic man” (Orpana, 2016, p. 90). Lee Majors, as Colonel Steve Austin, is transformed from a victim of failed technology to a valuable government property (Orpana, 2016, p. 99). Initially referred to as “scrap,” Austin signals his transformation as inhuman, as he refers to his doctor as “Dr. Frankenstein” (Orpana, 2016, p. 99). Likewise, in *The Bionic Woman*, Lindsay Wagner’s character, Jamie Sommers, when informed by Austin that she is also “bionic” after a skiing accident

states, “I don’t want to be a freak! Why didn’t you just let me die?” (Jenkins, 2011, p. 106). That reaction plays into a stereotypical disability equals “freak” and better off dead images.

A refreshing break from the typical stereotypes happened in the 80s, when disabled comedienne Geri Jewell becoming the first actor with a visible disability to have a recurring role in a television series, *The Facts of Life* (Haller, 2005). As a comedienne, Jewell’s comedy is often self-deprecating and she makes a lot of jokes about her disability, cerebral palsy, at her own expense. Jewell’s role on *The Facts of Life* was often similar in that regard (Jacobson, 2012, p. 48). A review of a 1984 autobiography of Jewell, *Geri*, is reviewed with an eye directly on disability stereotypes, as the book is said to be “refreshing and optimistic . . . [Jewell] comes through as a realistic, likeable and courageous person” (Johnson, 1984). Jewell also appeared in a much more textured role in the mid-00’s western *Deadwood*, to good reviews (Haller, 2005). Jewell’s character pays homage to the disabled people that were a part of life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Haller, 2005).

Airing from 1989 until 1993, the ABC family drama *Life Goes On* was groundbreaking for not only having a mentally disabled star, Chris Burke, but also a character with HIV, Jesse McKenna (Chad Lowe) (Elman, 2012, p. 317-8). Chris Burke, as Corky, faces the problems a typical person might imagine a person with Down syndrome might encounter from teachers and students (Elman, 2012, p. 317). Burke brings significant texture to Corky, as Corky’s romantic relationship and eventual marriage are a part of the story on the show (Elman, 2012, p. 319). The show also reveals a rejection of the “medical model” of disabilities when Corky’s parents are advised by

doctors to institutionalize Corky just after his birth (Elman, 2012, p. 319). HIV/AIDS was not included under the ADA's definition of disability until 1988, after the show ended, so that McKenna's discrimination will not be discussed here (Elman, 2012, p. 320). Where McKenna is a part of Corky's character is when the school discovers McKenna has HIV, and Corky sides with the students that want to kick him out of McKenna out of school (Elman, 2012, p. 321). Corky's father paints the movement to remove McKenna as "abelist prejudice," and tells Corky that Corky was the also the victim of the same prejudice (Elman, 2012, p. 321).

Through *Life Goes On*, Corky seeks a romantic relationship with an able-bodied character, but is rejected, which doesn't play on a traditional literary stereotype, but does highlight that the "other" has a difficult time with romantic relationships. Corky eventually does encounter a romantic relationship with a character with Down syndrome, Amanda Swanson (Andrea Friedman) (Elman, 2012, p. 323). Initially, Corky and Amanda are not given any sexual agency by others in the show, but *Life Goes On's* writers give Corky sexual agency as the character resists discrimination regarding his abilities (Elman, 2012, p. 323). Corky and Amanda elope, and Amanda's parents seek to have the marriage ended due to Amanda's mental state, but her parents are thwarted by a dramatic courtroom display from Corky (Elman, 2012, p. 323). While some stereotypes exist in regard to Corky's abilities on *Life Goes On*, the series seems to more realistically depict a mental disability without becoming awash in the hackneyed literary tropes explored above.

A couple of television programs in the aughts explored disabilities. *Joan of Arcadia* and *Friday Night Lights* included significant characters with spinal cord injuries,

paraplegia specifically (Wiggins, 2013). Each program had story arcs devoted to how each character struggled with disability. *Friday Night Lights* was the only show that had any academic articles related to disabilities. In the premier season of *Friday Night Lights*, Jason Street, the star quarterback, was rendered a quadriplegic due to a football injury (Cherney & Lindemann, 2014, p. 2). As Cherney and Lindemann (2014) state, however, that “western culture’s institution of athletic sport teaches homophobia and ableism, twisting each together into a Gordian knot” (p. 4). While Street’s relationship with football and his friends is complicated, in a narrative sense, there is not any clear direction regarding disability models, although a nod to the medical model might be found in the fourth episode of season one (Cherney & Lindemann, 2014, p. 10). In episode eight of the first season, Street and another disabled friend end up on the floor, and call for a nurse to help them back into their wheelchairs, which is also nodding at the idea that medicine, or someone involved with the medical field, had to assist the two characters (Cherney & Lindemann, 2014, p. 13).

Regarding *Joan of Arcadia*, the premise of the serial is a typical teenage girl, Joan Girardi, having conversations with God. Joan’s older brother, Kevin (Jason Ritter), is a former star athlete that is a paraplegic as the result of a motor vehicle accident (Ozer, 2004). Ritter is not disabled, which is sadly not unusual for an able-bodied actor to undergo “crip drag” for a television role – even though there are plenty of disabled actors that could likely have played the role of Kevin. Kevin exhibits anger towards people that are seeking to help him, and at times is his own worst enemy, exhibiting a common example of disabled representations (Ozer, 2004). Kevin does have a sexual relationship in the series, which is a refreshing non-stereotypical representation of disability. (Ozer,

2004) Character's interactions with Kevin are usually affected because of his wheelchair/disability (Wilcox, 2005, p. 87).

A different type of television doctor, a disabled, addicted misanthrope, was a fixture on the Fox television network from 2004 through 2012 with the television serial *House, M.D.* (House, n.d.). Dr. Gregory House is unlike early television doctors, such as Ben Casey or Dr. Kildare, who enforced positive images for doctors (Turow, 1996, as cited by Strauman & Goodier, 2008, p. 127). Strauman and Goodier (2008) write, "House . . . counters the overly positive images of television physicians of the past by casting the doctor as a wholly human and often unlikable character" (p. 130). House has no faith in patients, insults patients and co-workers, abuses Vicodin, injects morphine, yet is painted as a brilliant doctor with borderline mystic capabilities in regard to diagnosis and treatment of disease (Strauman & Goodier, 2008, p. 129-30). David Shore, creator of *House, M.D.*, said of the character, "there's a little Sherlock Holmes in there, a little me, and a little bit of me wanting to turn the traditional caring doctor on its head" (Dr. Gregory House). Hugh Laurie, the British actor that brings House to life in "crip drag," stated that, "I couldn't imagine how someone that jagged and complicated and superficially unlikable would be the center of a TV program" (Dr. Gregory House).

House's disabilities are his noticeable limp, caused from a misdiagnosed blood clot, as well as a Vicodin addiction resulting from the pain of his injured leg. (Rich *et al*, 2008, p. 224). House exhibits two of the stereotypes in that his disability makes him nasty and unbearable as a person, and his brilliance at diagnosing disease is almost supernatural, standing for the disabled seer/mystic representation, both discussed above.

Another wildly successful, well reviewed, and innovative Fox network serial, *Glee*, features many disabled representations, most notably the character Artie Abrams (Kevin Hale). Abrams was disabled at the age of 8 as the result of a car accident (Rucker, 2012, p. 27). Abrams is well liked and successful in the fictional world of McKinley High School, although occasionally falling victim to the classic disability trope of “own worst enemy” as well as occasionally “defensive” and “nasty,” which lands Abrams squarely into the “disabled outside equals disabled inside” stereotype (Rucker, 2012, p. 27). One could see the character of Abrams being a suitable model for disabled fans of *Glee* with the exception of one glaring problem: Kevin Hale’s is in “crip drag” (Rucker, 2012, p. 28). Crip drag, if that was not obvious, is the term many disabled people use to describe an able-bodied person portraying someone with a disability – disability’s version of blackface (Kociemba, 2010).

*Glee* drew significant criticism not only for Hale’s crip drag version of Abrams, but as well as for *Glee*’s creator Ryan Murphy refusing to engage in a dialog with disabled activists regarding representations of disability (Wiggins, 2013, p. 66). Meredith Wiggins (2013) also notes that Abrams is forced into a “heteronormative” sexual identity in a relationship when Abrams suggests that vaginal intercourse is the only kind of sexual expression that matters (p. 69-70) That story arc furthers the dominant culture just as much as the “compulsory able-bodiedness” of Hale playing the disabled Abrams enforces the able-bodied = good, disabled = other in dominant culture (Wiggins, 2013, p. 71).

Robert David Hall, a double amputee, laments the casting of Hale in the Abrams role as another wasted opportunity to cast a disabled actor in a disabled character role (Lynn, n.d.). Hall is a part of the cast of the long-running CBS crime drama, *CSI: Crime*

*Scene Investigation* (Lynn, n.d.). In defense of *Glee*, one of the principal casting agents, Robert Ulrich, sought disabled actors, even contacting the Media Access Office (MAO), but no actors were available that could fit the part of Abrams (Rucker, 2012, p. 29).

A content analysis performed on the show *Glee* found that disability was represented as “normal” or not falling into a stereotype the most, while “pitiable or pathetic” and “needing or receiving help” tied for second most often representation (Rushing, 2012, p. 56). The ever-popular super cripp “inspiration” stereotype was the third most often found representation of disabilities in *Glee*, while “incapable of participating in life” and “disability as a hassle” were fourth and fifth, respectively (Rushing, 2012, p. 56). Other stereotypes appearing in the content analysis of *Glee* representations of disability were “disability as burden,” “atmosphere,” “object of ridicule,” “their own worst enemy,” “ignored,” and “sexually abnormal” (Rushing, 2012, p. 57).

Regarding agency, Jill Rushing (2012) found that disabled characters in *Glee* lacked the ability to voice agency, their agency was also either “short-lived” in that the agency the character found might only last for a particular episode, or was based on some event that might happen in the future (p. 58-9). Regarding power, Rushing (2012) found that disabled characters displayed power only when the issue being portrayed is disability related, and then only when a teacher or administrator creates the opportunity for the display of power (p. 60-1)

Colin Barnes addresses the principles television and film should follow regarding disabilities and disabled representations in his publication, *Disabling Imagery and the Media: An Exploration of the Principals for Media Representations of Disabled People*. First and foremost, Barnes (1992) states that discriminatory and “ableist” representations

will persist until disabled people are integrated in all area of media (p. 44). Journalists and reporters should beware of the impairment/disability distinction, as well as such stereotypically discriminatory words such as “crippling fear,” “blind trust,” and other clichés (Barnes, 1992, p. 44-5). Able-bodied actors should not play disabled characters, much like black characters are not played by white actors, and female characters are not played by male actors (Barnes, 1992, p. 45). Writers have a duty to check the accuracy of a disabled representation by seeking input from disabled people (Barnes, 1992, p. 45). When a disabled character plays a part in a work, don’t skip over environmental or social barriers the character might encounter and stay away from the stereotypical tropes (Barnes, 1992, p. 45-6).

#### Method

For the purposes of this study, I will analyze the discourse of disability representations and disability models portrayed in disability representations in television serials that aired on a major network, on Netflix, and on a basic cable series: *Speechless*, *Atypical*, and *Breaking Bad*, respectively. The analysis will treat the programs as text in light of Barthe’s definition discussed above: a common thread of cultural artifacts (Dauenhauer, 1982, p. 137). Fiske (1987) suggests that television programs are culture artifacts that provoke the audience to form meanings as well as passing those meanings through the culture (p. 1).

A textual, formal analysis, known as a close reading, which borrows much from literary studies, rhetorical analysis, film studies, and semiotic analysis (Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 26 – 35), will be employed to read the texts. Many theorists consider meanings ascribed to texts as being socially constructed, and as such the ideological systems that

construct those meanings seek to use the texts to enforce the dominant ideology (Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 36 – 7). Close reading will be used to analyze the relationship between the texts and the dominant ideology.

Anne O’Keeffe (2012) suggests that media discourse is changing rapidly due to the audience participation in media discourse through changing “participation frameworks” (p. 449). Because of Web 2.0, social networking primarily, O’Keeffe argues that 1) audiences have many fora (websites, social media, email, among others) with which to interact with media critics; 2) audiences are not passive message receivers, but engage with other fans and media producers through email, blog posts, website comments, etc.; and 3) audiences can provoke other media consumers to consume and react, favorably or not, with reactions that last, as once something is posted on the Internet, it will not evaporate (O’Keeffe, 2012, p. 450).

Jay Lemke (2012) postulates that all texts are windows into the cultures in which they were produced, but also all interpretations of those texts are a window into the analyst’s culture (p. 85). Lemke (2012) also states that any insightful discourse analysis is always a critical analysis, in that interpretation of a text is selective based in the analyst’s patent and latent ideologies (p. 85). In addition, Lemke (2012) argues that any discourse analysis is not meaningful unless the analysis evidences a “feeling” (p. 85). How an analyst feels about a text has a direct affect on the analyst’s “experiential reality (Lemke, 2012, p. 86). As such, Lemke (2012) states that any discourse analyst “should be able to see yourself, and not just your object of study, in the analysis you make” (p. 88).

With that in mind, I have performed a “critical discourse analysis” (CDA) of the texts mentioned. CDA “brings the critical tradition of social analysis into language

studies and contributes to critical social analysis a particular focus on discourse and on relations between discourse and other social elements (power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities, and so forth)” (Fairclough, 2012, p. 9). Fairclough (2012) states that critical social analyses have long viewed “social reality” as “conceptually mediated” because the texts are not only material being analyzed, but are also “semiotic in character” (p. 9). Because of the dual role of a text being not only an object of analysis, but also a way meaning is made, “critical social analysis has an interdisciplinary character . . . more specifically, a ‘trans-disciplinary’ character” because of how the analysis reaches into many disciplines to develop theories and methods (Jessup & Sum, 2001, as cited by Fairclough, 2012, p. 9).

Critical social analysis, with its emphasis on constructed social reality, is distinguished from mere social analysis in that critical social analysis considers how the current social reality came into being, which might negatively affect some people, and how those social realities might be altered positively (Fairclough, 2012, p 10).

Fairclough’s (2012) idea is that “values, evaluation and moral critique are necessary” in performing a critical social analysis, because “changing the world for the better depends on being able to explain how it has come to be the way it is” (p.10). Fairclough refers to CDA as a “‘methodology’ rather than a ‘method’” as a methodology is “a trans-disciplinary process of theoretically constructing the *object of research*” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, as cited by Fairclough, 2012, p. 13).

Fairclough (2012) suggests four steps in undergoing CDA: 1) “Focus upon a social wrong, its semiotic aspects” 2) “Identify obstacles to addressing the social wrong” 3) “Consider whether the social order ‘needs’ the social wrong” and 4) “Identify

possible ways past the obstacles” (p. 13). Elaborating further, regarding step one, Fairclough (2012) suggests a two stage approach, where in stage one, the researcher will “select a research topic that relates to, or points up, a social wrong and that can productively be approached in a trans-disciplinary way, with particular focus on dialectical relations between semiotic and other ‘moments’” and in stage two, the researcher will “construct objects of research for initially identified research topics by theorizing them in a trans-disciplinary way” (p. 13 – 4). For step two, Fairclough (2012) suggests a three stage approach, where in stage one, the researcher will “analyse dialectical relations between semiosis and other social elements: between orders of discourse and other elements of social practices, between texts and other elements of events,” stage two would “select texts and points of focus and categories for their analysis, in light of, and appropriately to, the constitution of the object of research,” and step three would “carry out analysis of textx – both interdiscursive analysis and linguistic/semiotic analysis” (p. 14). Fairclough’s (2012) suggestion for step three is “to consider whether the social wrong in focus is inherent to the social order, whether it can be addressed within it, or only by changing it” (p.15). Fairclough sees step four as taking the analysis “from negative to positive critique: identifying, with a focus on dialectical relations between semiosis and other elements, possibilities within the existing social process for overcoming obstacles to addressing the social wrong in question” (p. 15)

The data analyzed consisted of approximately eighty-two hours of television programming: *Speechless* (sixty-three episodes, approximately 21 minutes each), *Atypical* (twenty-eight episodes, approximately thirty minutes each), and *Breaking Bad* (sixty-two episodes, approximately 49 minutes each). The episode database (Appendix

A), contains only episodes involving disabled characters that were further analyzed. The final study will center on episodes that include specific representations of disability.

The textual analysis starts with a detailed analysis of each text considered, to determine not only if the text has a representation of disability, but to also see how many stereotypical disability representations exist and which models of disability (medical, social, or other) are used in presenting the representation. The final analysis considers the television programs and categorizes the representations in one of Barnes's (1992) stereotypical categories or not stereotypical, and will also categorize the representations as either depicting a "medical model" (see Dirth & Branscombe, 2017; Finkelstein, 1997; Gabel & Peters, 2004; Hahn, 1987; Oliver, 2004), or a "social model" (see Barnes, 2003; Mays, 2006; Oliver 1986; Rothman, 2003; Tregaskis, 2002), of disability.

## CHAPTER III - DISABILITY JUMPS THE SHARK: READING *SPEECHLESS*

### Introduction

Why look at a television serial program as a device for constructing and disseminating “disabilities” for analysis? Grosburg (1992) points out that television and the associated serialized programs distributed by the medium, as well as popular music and movies, construct how audiences make sense of the world and form networks of like minds and empowerment (as cited by Gray, p. 58, (1995)). With modern entertainment sources being scattered and personal in today’s climate versus the ubiquity of network television in the 1980s and 1990s, if a television network isn’t seeking out the low production costs of a game shows, “reality” shows, or a news magazine, using disabilities to garner an audience might be the final frontier. As pointed out above, disabled people constitute approximately 20% of the U.S. population according to the 2010 census.

“Disability” representation on television has yet to reach what Herman Gray (1995) refers to as the “Cosby moment” (p. 79). Gray’s (1995) “Cosby moment” is how *The Cosby Show* reconfigured a “black cultural style” regarding the representation of black people and black culture on television (p. 79). Gray (1995) states that the critical representation of black people *The Cosby Show* constructed is powerful because the Huxtables are a typical upper-middle-class family through and through “that happens to be black” (Dates, 1990; Dyson, 1989; Fuller, 1992; Gray, 1989; Greenly, 1987; Jhally and Lewis, 1992; as cited by Gray, p. 80)

ABC’s most recent entry into the running for disability culture’s “Cosby moment” is the situation comedy *Speechless*. Unfortunately for disability culture, *Speechless* was cancelled in May of 2019. *Speechless* started off with strong ratings on Wednesday

nights, but after a couple of years of declining ratings, *Speechless* was sentenced to Friday, the death knell for many television series. For all of the good things *Speechless* had, the show did not have the mighty “Cos” at the helm to construct “the *Speechless* moment” for disabled culture.

For some background on *Speechless*, Scott Silveri, *Speechless* creator and executive producer, got his start in television as a writer and a producer for some very popular television shows, such as *Mad About You*, *Friends*, and *Joey* among others (Scott Silveri, n.d.). The idea for *Speechless* is very personal for Silveri, as his older brother has “special needs” (Nakamura, 2016). Silveri has stated that he wanted to share his experience for a long time, but he did not want to have the story turn into an “issues show” (Nakamura, 2016).

#### Season One, Episode One, Pilot

From season one, episode one, *Pilot*, *Speechless* sets up the DiMeo family as a somewhat typical sitcom family: Maya, the scattered and manic mom; Jimmy, the supportive dad; Dylan, the independent fireball youngest child; Ray, the neurotic and out of place middle child; and the “star” of the family, oldest child JJ. The very first scene is a chaotic race to exercise a restaurant’s coupon that is about to expire. Maya’s over the top driving ends with the family’s van sliding into a handicapped parking spot at the restaurant. Immediately Maya gets into a confrontation with an older woman who complains about the van’s lack of a handicapped hang tag. The older woman asks if she should be expected to walk a long way to get to the restaurant, just as JJ makes his screen debut. JJ is in a power wheelchair on a wheelchair lift descending from the van. The twist on the typical sitcom family is that JJ is non-verbal and has spastic Cerebral Palsy. Maya

then dresses down a couple of bystanders gawking at the scene, and JJ proceeds to give the bystanders “the finger.”

Within the first two minutes of the series, the social model of disability is enforced twice, and JJ’s character firmly rejects classic disabled stereotypes and paints himself in a powerful position with a lot of agency. As the episode continues, JJ’s mode of communication is revealed: a laser pointer attached to his glasses that he uses to point at common words and spell uncommon words, which is a low-tech solution some non-verbal people use. The DiMeo’s are changing residences because the school system will provide a better situation for JJ. At the new school, JJ will have a full-time aide that will be his “voice.” The house the DiMeo’s are moving into is referred to by Jimmy as “the worst house in the best neighborhood,” and it is a wreck.

The DiMeo’s go to school for the first day with JJ’s aide, Jennifer, a middle-aged woman that seems inappropriate for his needs. Out walks the well-meaning, but off the mark school principal, Dr. Miller. The school’s wheelchair ramp is in the back of the school, and while the ramp seems completely fine and legal, Maya DiMeo is not happy that a “garbage ramp” is what JJ must use to enter or leave the school. A school custodian, Kenneth Clements, a thirty-something year old black male, assures Maya that the ramp was used to push “a sweet crippled grandmother” inside for a basketball game. Uh oh. Maya goes into a diatribe about a new ramp and offers “a crash course in human dignity” about Kenneth’s use of “crippled” when referring to a disabled person. Maya’s exaggerated interaction with Kenneth seems mean spirited and was certainly written to paint a picture to the audience about using the word “crippled.” This shows what many disabled people and associates, and certainly Silveri, know is true, and that is that often

disabled people have to be demonstratively exaggerated and forceful to explain how a person's words and actions are distasteful, regardless as to whether the speaker or actor intended to be distasteful.

Cut to JJ and Jennifer entering the classroom of the impossibly well-meaning but overly politically correct English teacher, Mr. Powers. Mr. Powers leads the class in a standing ovation for JJ, which is completely unnecessary and unwarranted. From personal experience, few things feel more awkward than being put in the spotlight when all you want is to be treated as any typical person would be treated. Mr. Powers uses a heavily used trope when a disabled person is represented when he refers to JJ as “an inspiration.” Obviously, that was used jokingly, and someone that has studied disability representations would certainly know that is a hackneyed stereotype, but how many people don't know that the overture was meant as a joke?

As Maya petitions for a new ramp at the front of the school, Kenneth tells her that the school knows about her reputation and they have been briefed on how to “handle” her. This of course makes Maya angry, and she decides the school is not the place for JJ. Ray argues that he likes the school and wants to stay there. This leads to what must be a common sentiment in many families with a disabled child: Ray points out that his desires and needs are taking a back seat to JJ. Maya eventually decides the family should stay at the school, apologizes to Ray, and explains her position as a tireless advocate for JJ.

As the episode continues, JJ has a one on one meeting with Kenneth. JJ tells Kenneth he sounds “cool,” and immediately tries to get Kenneth as his replacement for the mismatched Jennifer. Kenneth and JJ speak to the school at an event, where JJ, with Kenneth as his voice, announces his candidacy for Student Council President, which is

met with wild cheers from the students at the event. The stunt is to help Ray out of a tight situation, and the stunt succeeds. However, that is the first of many unrealistic demonstrations of support for JJ. This is addressed later in the chapter.

There is a close reading of the first episode, and it is being used to set the stage for the series. The major characters are sketched out, and while the characters morph and change through the series, the characters stay pretty close to this introduction. Some aspects of the episode are great, in particular the running joke about how patronizing and “over the top” school administration and teachers are regarding JJ and his disability. Maya’s defensive nature toward JJ and her fierce advocacy in many situations is likely how most families with a disabled child also navigate the numerous obstacles that disabled children and, by extension the rest of the family, face.

*Speechless* is first and foremost a situational comedy, and the episodes are presented like all other sitcoms: set-up, conflict, sometimes a side conflict, resolution. The younger characters morph through the three seasons, both physically and mentally. Dylan, the youngest child, is painted as a talented athlete, and at times embodies the “meathead” athlete persona, which is interesting to see portrayed by a female. Ray’s evolution is also interesting as he goes from awkward neurotic to love interest to nerdy girl-crazy teen. JJ is fairly linear in his development, but his maturation is more mental and emotional than physical. Most episodes in the first season of *Speechless* revolve around JJ and have something to do with his disability, which is understandable. As Barnes mentions in his list of stereotypes, a big stereotype regarding disabled people on television is “incapable of participating full in community life” (Cumberbatch and Negrene, 1992, p. 136 as cited by Barnes, 1992, p. 34). Barnes labels that stereotype as

one of omission since “less than one and a half percent of all characters portrayed” on television are disabled (Cumberbatch and Negrene, 1992, p. 136 as cited by Barnes, 1992, p. 34). A short bit of research would show that there are not too many television serials that feature a non-verbal person with cerebral palsy.

While JJ, his disability, and the world’s interaction with disabilities make up the bulk of the subjects for the episodes in the series, one should make no mistake in thinking this is a vehicle for Micah Fowler, the actor portraying JJ in *Speechless*. This television serial is a vehicle for Minnie Driver, through and through. And to be honest, it would be pretty hard to stand out and take charge of the screen when you don’t say a word. In addition, the rest of the cast constantly takes JJ’s agency by finishing his sentences. However, *Speechless* does manage to tell a credible story of disability and how a disabled person negotiates life in a typical world.

#### Representing Disability in *Speechless*

As shown above, tried and true tropes used in literature and film easily transfer to television characters. The DiMeo’s, and JJ in particular, seem to consciously make it a point to not embrace or enforce those stereotypes in *Speechless*, on the whole. One reason for this seems to be that Silveri, the show’s creator, stated that he wanted to present life in a disabled family from a realistic point of view (Nakamura, 2016). Regarding JJ’s place within *Speechless*, Silveri has said, “[f]rom the very beginning, we wanted to make sure that JJ was not a prop, that JJ was not something to be experienced by everyone else” (Bernstein, 2019). Another reason is certainly because Micah Fowler, the actor playing JJ, has cerebral palsy. The show is specifically written from a point of view that typical society usually misses the mark when considering a disabled person or a similarly

situated disabled family from the outside. While disability activists and researchers are keenly aware of the stereotypes, the lack of nuanced and textured representations of disability in mainstream entertainment serve to perpetuate those stereotypes with a typical viewer. A third reason would be the inclusion of Zach Anner, a talented comedian, writer and a disabled person (Zach Anner, n.d.). Anner's experience as disabled lends more credibility to *Speechless*. Anner also plays a character on *Speechless*, and the character becomes somewhat of a mentor for JJ.

The show typically evidences that it is not the disabled person that embodies the traditional stereotypes, but rather how "normal" people are expecting JJ or the DiMeo family to act in a stereotypical manner, and then how JJ or the family break with those stereotypes. As early as the second episode of the series, *Speechless* presents JJ as a stereotypical teenage boy. JJ reveals that while he may be disabled, he is as sexualized as any high school sophomore. He ignores his mom's phone call to ogle cheerleaders, instead of checking in and explaining why he is not attending physical therapy. JJ and Maya have an argument about JJ needing some space and time to be a teenage boy. Maya eventually sees that Kenneth is a good thing for JJ to have in his life, as JJ's dynamic with life is more his own and not filtered through what Maya wants for him. This is certainly something families that have a disabled person must face.

*Speechless* goes far to show the absurdity of accommodation at times; disabled people want to be treated equally, not special. When asked how far *Speechless* might go to address the failure of the ADA or the failure of society in addressing access issues, Silveri states,

[A]s it stands, I think we've been able to carve out a sort of unique and sometimes subversive tack without even delving into the political at all. I take a lot of pride in our show being a kind show, and a civil show. And I think, if there's a statement, that's it. We don't all need to be sons of bitches to each other. We can look out for each other a little more. That seems to be a somewhat radical idea right now [laughs]. That's as political as we get right now. (Bernstein, 2019)

Scott Silveri, the show's creator, in one of the interviews given regarding *Speechless*, tackles the social model of disability head on. When asked about the difficulty of travelling with Micah Fowler, the actor playing the role of JJ in *Speechless*, Silveri mentions,

[T]he difficulty in travelling [with Fowler] is just a fact of life. I notice that, not even when I travel abroad with Micah, which I've now done, I notice that when I go out to lunch with Micah. As heightened as my awareness is to these issues, I can't go in a restaurant and find a place to sit with this kid. I can't go to get coffee and find a way in that's easy. The obstacles that are thrown up in the way of people like Micah are very real, and it's something that we work hard to mine for story, and for comedy.

(Bernstein, 2019)

Silveri's very personal connection with the social model of disability, and his apparent keen awareness of historical disability representations on television, make *Speechless* a very uncommon story approached in a common sitcom format. The alterations to the

classic sitcom come in the form of the cast, the themes, and the story told, which will be analyzed below.

### Casting Disability Representations in *Speechless*

From a 2019 report by GLAAD, formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, from approximately 879 regular characters appearing in television shows, 27, or approximately 3%, of those characters are disabled. That is the highest number found on broadcast television by GLAAD in the ten years since disabilities have been included in GLAAD's "Where are We on TV" surveys (GLAAD, 2019). However, a U.S. Census survey, the 2017 American Community Survey, shows the number of non-institutionalized disabled Americans is approximately 13%, and the number is much higher if non-apparent disabilities is included, so the number of characters fall far short of reality (as cited by GLAAD, 2019).

Unlike other contemporary shows, *Glee* and *Atypical*, which is analyzed in this writing, *Speechless* stars disabled actor Micah Fowler. According to IMDB, Fowler's first major acting role was in the 2013 film *Labor Day* as the character Barry (Micah Fowler, n.d.). With Silveri's experience growing up with a disabled brother, one would only expect a disabled actor to portray the JJ character. Fowler is not non-verbal, although his speech is certainly affected by Cerebral Palsy. Considering the great number of shows that have "temporarily able-bodied" people, that minor detail has no consequence.

As a disabled character, JJ is written really well, and rarely does the character ever step into the worn stereotypes. JJ and the limitations typically highlight the social model of disabilities, which is discussed in more depth below regarding episode themes.

The episodes in the first season of *Speechless* mostly focus on JJ, so there are lots of examples of a disabled character engaging in conduct that embody being a teenage boy, disabled or not. JJ, as a typical teenager, ogles girls, as mentioned above, seeks a girlfriend and is rejected, plays sports, directs films, tours college campuses, and other activities in which a typical teenager might engage.

In season one, episode five, *H-A-L- HALLOWEEN*, JJ attends a Halloween party and wants to drink a beer, which Kenneth prevents. Kenneth leaves to get a non-alcoholic beverage for JJ, while JJ convinces some teens to give him a beer. In a very funny scene, JJ tries to communicate in a drunken state to Kenneth, and his pointer is not making any coherent words, to which Kenneth exclaims, “You’re slurring your words!” “Drunk” JJ starts howling and runs over Kenneth’s feet. Kenneth explains how this will make him look bad as he was still earning JJ’s parent’s trust. As a drunken JJ and Kenneth return home, JJ regurgitates in his lap, exposing his drunkenness, which sends Maya into a fit of anger at Kenneth. JJ eventually admits that he tricked Kenneth so he could drink beer. The parents revel in punishing JJ for being a “normal teenager,” which they correct to “idiot teenager.”

There is a disability moms’ group and the DiMeo’s invite the moms and the dads over to their house for an Oscar party in season one, episode sixteen, *O-S- OSCAR P-A-PARTY*. Some of the disabled kids have apparent disabilities and others have non-apparent disabilities. While the children with obvious disabilities need no explanation, I would think that Silveri would not hire typical actors to play the role of disabled kids. The climax of the episode has the disability moms in revolt and the disability dads having a great time partying. Meanwhile, the disabled kids all fighting to the death, orchestrated

by Kenneth. In any other context, the scene with the disabled kids “brawling” might be seen as exploitative or simply out of place, but within the confines of *Speechless*, the scene of chaos is a fitting nod to being typical kids.

In a short episode arc, season one episodes nineteen and twenty, *C-H-CHEATER* and *R-U-N-RUNAWAY*, respectively, JJ ends up “running away” from home after hearing Maya discuss his future without his input or participation, discussed below. He ends up going to a casino with the goal of going to a strip club. Instead, JJ ends up seeing another disabled guy, Lee, portrayed by Zach Anner, an actor and comedian with cerebral palsy. Anner gained notoriety with a reality show, *Rollin’ with Zach*, and has a series of shows on YouTube that generally talk about his life and life with a disability. In the casino, JJ sees Lee there with a girlfriend, and ends up meeting Lee. JJ ends up talking with Lee about independence and how to live as an adult with a disability. Lee ends up as a mentor figure for JJ in the episode and appears in later episodes. Lee suggests that JJ should seek more independence and carve out his own space. A really truthful lesson, this is one of the types of stories that makes *Speechless* a really truthful representation of disabilities.

After JJ has single-handedly turned Lafayette High School into a pantheon for disabled people, there is a new group of disabled people at the school in season two, episode two, *F-I- FIRST S-E-SECOND F--FIRST DAY*. Maya trains the new aides in season two, episode four, *T-R - - TRAINING D-A- - DAY*, and a new cast of disabled students becomes a part of *Speechless* in season two, episode six. Immediately, Kenneth senses students “shipping” JJ, which is aggressively pushing two people into a relationship, in this case JJ and a new disabled female student. The biggest plus out of this event is that more actual disabled characters get to work.

### Thematic Elements in *Speechless*

In looking at *Speechless* regarding classic disability representations, most often, *Speechless* uses the classic representations and pokes holes in them - but not always. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the close reading of the first episode, when the DiMeo entourage arrives at a restaurant, an older woman challenges the need for the family to park there just as JJ is revealed on the wheelchair descending from the van in which the Dimeo's arrived. This is painting the disabled JJ as the foil for the older woman's challenge, which is funny and ironic. Just after, JJ gestures at a couple of gawking onlookers, to which Maya proudly points out that JJ is "giving them the finger." So, while JJ is strong in his right to be parked in a handicapped parking space and is showing significant agency by gesturing toward the onlookers, it is just as possibly a viewer could consider JJ pitiable on the wheelchair lift, and then immediately as a boorish person for his aggressive hand gesture. Most probably, though, any viewer to *Speechless* would assume this is not a typical sitcom and would have viewed the scene as comedic foremost.

Then there is Logan, Ray DiMeo's girlfriend Taylor's brother. Logan also has cerebral palsy but is verbal. Although it is never really explained why, Logan and JJ are rivals and do not get along. Logan shows up in season two, episode nine, *S-T--STAR W-- WARS W-- WARS*. In that episode, Maya somehow magically gets two tickets from the cerebral palsy foundation to the premier of the Star Wars franchise movie, *The Last Jedi*. Ray is a huge Star Wars fan, but JJ decides to take a female classmate. To get back at JJ, Ray takes Logan to the Star Wars premiere, even though Ray and Logan do not have tickets. Film director Kevin Smith is at the premiere, no doubt because of his Star Wars

fandom, and gets Ray and Logan VIP treatment for the movie. The fact that a sitcom decided it was good to give a disabled person a flawed character at times is pretty strong. As funny as it is though, that does enforce the disabled body equals disabled mind stereotype.

Disability and access also take realistic punches as early as season one, episode three, *B-O-N-BONFIRE*, when JJ is excluded from attending a school function on the beach. *Speechless* does a great job at pointing out the ridiculousness of how people go above and beyond to “accommodate” disabled people in ways that are not wanted and typically not necessary. The school is hosting a bonfire on the beach, which JJ can’t access. JJ is disappointed, and why wouldn’t he be? Disabled people have to “suck it up” often, because the disabled person isn’t considered when an event is planned. Maya overreacts and the principal moves the bonfire to the gym, which is a colossal flop. The students have a mini revolt and get angry at JJ because the bonfire was moved, and the character of the event suffered. While of course it didn’t occur to anyone that JJ might have a problem on the sand, JJ’s mobility issue would be nothing a few sheets of plywood wouldn’t solve.

The “inspiration” stereotype is something that appears in all media but is completely out of touch in a news setting. Anytime a disabled person does seemingly anything other than existing, most news outlets treat a disabled person like an inspiration to humanity. *Speechless* is great at pointing out the absurdity of that typical trope. In season one, episode four, *I-N-S-INSPIRATIONS*, JJ and Kenneth leave for a day all about JJ, with no family and no Maya. Kenneth and JJ get special treatment on an outing, because people in the scene were “inspired” by a disabled kid eating out, with another

person paying for their meal. This special treatment has never happened to Kenneth, as he is able-bodied, so Kenneth decides he and JJ should take extreme advantage of people “because we’re inspirations!” Seeing Kenneth and JJ being treated as royalty is very funny, from free baseball games with VIP seats to throwing out the first pitch at Dodger Stadium. JJ gets increasingly angry at being exploited by Kenneth, and states, “Today was about what I wanted. You took my voice. You don’t get to do that.”

The subplot of that episode is that the rest of the DiMeo family has a JJ free day. They have a great time playing paintball, which of course would be impossible for JJ. The family starts to feel guilty because they are having so much fun without JJ. The obvious real moments like that one really makes *Speechless*’s representation of disability so much better than most television programs. Other seemingly apt realistic issues such as disabilities and relationships and long-term care and living for disabled people are explored further below.

Season one, episode twelve, *H-E-R-HERO* tackles the “inspiration” issue as well as the inherent costs of being disabled. Ray has the bright idea to write an essay about how JJ is his hero, as he believes that would win a contest and the cash prize. When he asks JJ about his plan, JJ rejects the idea because he tells Ray, “Because I’m not your hero.” As it turns out, another student, Donald, uses JJ as a hero in the essay contest. JJ is mad at being used as “inspiration porn,” and then states, “I blame Tiny Tim.” JJ and Kenneth confront Donald about the essay, and JJ flatly states, “I don’t exist to make you feel better about yourself.” JJ relents and agrees to be an inspiration for Ray, to hopefully out pity and out hero Donald’s speech. JJ says that Ray needs to write about how happy JJ is always, and that JJ’s desire is to “help able-bodied people grow.” This excites

Kenneth, who exclaims, “Hey! This is the magical negro,” referring to the stereotypical role of black people in stories that serve only to help the white character along and provide a curio to the story. JJ remarks, “We both get clichés” in reference to Kenneth’s observation. Ray is laying his inspiration on thick at first, but in the middle decides he can’t feed into the inspiration porn stereotype, and states that JJ isn’t brave or trying to inspire anyone but is only living his life. In true *Speechless* form, Ray does not win the contest, but Donald’s unrealistic JJ hero essay wins the contest.

A very interesting issue the show highlights, but maybe goes a bit too far with, is the idea that possibly disabled people use a disability to get an unfair advantage in some situations with season two, episode eighteen, *N-O--NOMINEE*. This squarely falls into the disabled mind equals disabled body stereotype at first glance. Maya enters JJ’s student film into a festival and specifically mentions JJ’s disability to hopefully curry favor with the nominating panel. JJ gets upset because he believes the only reason he is nominated for an award is because of his disability and not his work. JJ remarks that this is another situation in which he is not seen as a person but as a wheelchair/disability. Later in the episode, JJ decides to go to another festival at which he was being honored so he can at the least eat the festival food. However, it turns out the festival organizer did not know JJ was disabled, and JJ’s movie was honored on its merits.

Another theme in *Speechless*, especially in the first season, is how Jimmy describes the DiMeo family in season one, episode two, *N-E-NEW A-I-AIDE*. Jimmy points out “our family has a complicated life; things are gonna fall through the cracks.” Jimmy points out that the DiMeos are messy, unkempt, and probably won’t meet any expectations the neighbors might have. Jimmy says that the DiMeo’s should exhibit that

they are idiots, and as such people won't care about them and will leave them alone. The family is always in a hurry, is always late, and is generally a mess. Certainly "typical" families can and do exhibit the same characteristics at times, but the consistent picture of disabled family = mess does seem to be forced into *Speechless*. The family uses the time without JJ to get their life together as a family in the first episode of the second season, *W-E--WE'RE B-A--BACK*, but Jimmy does mention to Ray that the change will not last, and it does not.

Season one episodes nineteen and twenty, *C-H-CHEATER* and *R-U-N-RUNAWAY*, respectively, which are mentioned above regarding casting disabled people, explore a couple of very real themes for disabled people and parents: how does a disabled child approach adulthood and what about caregivers and aides after high school. In episode nineteen, this starts with JJ being called out for cheating on schoolwork by a teacher. As the claim is true, JJ starts working hard and taking tests on his own. Ray questions Jimmy about JJ's future and needing to contribute and be prepared, which is certainly a topic for a family to have about a disabled child. Jimmy and Maya have a talk about JJ's future with Dylan and Ray, supposedly with JJ not there or involved in the discussion. However, JJ makes a solo entrance and hears the family discussing his future without his input, which makes him hurt and angry, so he "runs away" to Kenneth's residence. As episode twenty begins, Kenneth calls Maya and explains the situation about JJ hearing about planning his future without him. JJ expresses his anger to his family, and Maya decides to help JJ run away, to prove JJ needs her for something. JJ eventually tells Maya that he needs to be independent and that she can't solve everything for him, which is a recurring theme in several episodes. JJ ends up speaking to another person with

cerebral palsy, the aforementioned Lee, and they strike up a mentor/mentee relationship. Being able to see someone succeed that is in the same situation is certainly empowering to JJ, as well as others in that situation.

JJ's independence theme recurs in season one, episode twenty-two, *M-A-MAY J-A-JAY* which starts with a particularly funny scene when JJ refuses help buttoning his shirt. JJ's lack of dexterity with his hands practically makes intricate moves like buttoning a shirt practically impossible without some helper tools, which all disabled people have available. From bendable spoons and forks with big handles to make use easier for people that lack dexterity to securely grip typical silverware, to button hooks and shoehorns, there are life tools available for most any situation. The scene with JJ and the shirt button encompasses an entire day/night for him trying to button the buttons in time lapse. The theme of the episode is that JJ wants to go away for the summer and learn more independence. Maya finally realizes that JJ needs independence, and decides JJ does need the shot at independence, and the camp would be a good exercise. The episode does drop in a little bit of "inspiration porn" when Maya tells JJ he inspires her, which is probably heartfelt, but it is a cliché, nonetheless.

The inspiration porn carries into season two, episode one, *W-E--WE'RE B-A--BACK* as JJ makes a call to his parents from camp. As JJ describes all he has been doing, Dylan asks him how he does it. JJ's answer is "I find a way. Disability is no excuse here." Textbook inspiration porn, for some reason. The family goes on a wild goose chase to find JJ's summer camp romance, and of course they find her. *Speechless* rarely gets sappy and cliched, but this episode certainly gets an extremely happy ending.

The show addresses friendship between able-bodied and disabled people fairly directly in season two, episode fifteen, *U-N--FORGETTABLE P-A-PAIN*. Aaron, one of JJ's classmates, and JJ connect over their love of films, so Aaron asks JJ to see a movie together. This makes JJ anxious about going out with Aaron, as JJ believes he will be a burden to Aaron and will not have a good time. This is the disability as a burden stereotype being displayed. Dylan decides to go along to help with JJ as an aide, so JJ will be more at ease with going out with a friend. The episode does address some very real issues, especially the lack of accessible taxis or public transportation. In addition, the sidewalk is cracked and not accessible, either, so JJ has to move from the sidewalk into the street. Then it begins raining, and the water shorts the wheelchair controls out. The shorted controls render the wheelchair useless, and everyone gets wet. JJ gets frustrated and thinks he is bothering Aaron, so JJ suggests Aaron leave him in the rain. JJ believes all of his possible friends get annoyed at having to alter events for his disability. In the episode twist, Aaron believes that JJ was annoyed at him. Aaron and JJ end up being friends because of the hardships - Aaron saw them as a challenge rather than a bother.

There are other issues that are expressed by the shows that a typical family would not generally consider. A theme that comes up a couple of times is romantic relationships with JJ, and by extension disabled people. In season one, episode six, *D-A-T-E-DATE?*, a temporarily disabled female student, Claire, and JJ strike up a friendship. Kenneth attempts to facilitate a romantic relationship between JJ and Claire, by suggesting physical therapy together. As a side note, it is interesting how *Speechless* dives right in regarding JJ's physical therapy needs, something many people may have never considered. As the episode progresses, Kenneth suggests that Claire might be interested

in JJ, to which JJ replies, “You don’t understand, I know how girls see me, like a friend or a teddy bear.” There are not many examples of disabled people and temporarily able-bodied people in romantic relationships on television, in films, or in books. Certainly, being disabled must present an interesting picture regarding romance to some people, and no doubt being disabled is a hard “no” for some people. The relationship occurs in a couple of other places, such as season two, episode one, *W-E--WE’RE B-A--BACK* where JJ is shown to have a romantic relationship with a deaf girl, but it is not explored beyond that episode. Later in season two, episode six, *S-H-SHIPPING*, JJ’s classmates all push him into a relationship with another disabled female student.

Going further with the relationship theme, JJ does end up in a romantic relationship with a classmate, Izzy, in season three, episode 11, *H-E-HEY, YOU*. JJ is a film director for a class project, and Izzy is in the film. As Izzy and JJ work together, they connect romantically. The relationship lasts until the end of the series. They graduate high school, search for colleges together, and then the series ends. This situation will be addressed further below.

In looking at the series in total, *Speechless* goes a long way in addressing the stereotypical issues and well-worn tropes used throughout literature, films, and television to represent disability. First and central to the story is JJ, who is a disabled actor portraying a disabled character. This is not a small issue, as many popular shows, mentioned above, have used actors in “crip drag” to represent a disabled character. The social model of disability is enforced quite often, and the few medical model scenes that exist, such as the physical therapist stretching and working on JJ standing, offer a typical viewer the chance to consider the reality of muscle tone, spasticity, and the nitty gritty of

disabilities. The stereotypes that are used are tongue-in-cheek or over the top to make a point. The episodes that cover inspiration porn; season one, episode four, *I-N-S-INSPIRATIONS*; and the disabled heroic character; season one, episode twelve, *H-E-R-HERO*; are quite pointed, and thoroughly eviscerate those topics. The cast is funny, and the episodes show mostly the reality of what life is in a house with a disabled child. With all of the good, why did the show only last for three seasons, fading away on the Friday night home for disabled situation comedies?

### Problems in *Speechless*

The biggest problem with *Speechless* is the elephant in the room - the lead character does not talk. The show is based on a disabled star that doesn't utter one word. While this is the only way to juxtapose the young white guy with the hip aide, and allows for some funny situations, it is hard to get to know a character that only speaks with someone else's voice. As such, JJ's ability to speak up and voice his displeasure or support for a situation is moderated. This takes JJ's agency away. By everyone speaking for JJ, this reinforces the idea that disabled people can't speak for themselves. It also highlights the social model of disability in that JJ's social barrier is derived from people not looking at him for his words, but listening through his attendant, whether that person is a sibling, a parent, or Kenneth.

Another problem with *Speechless* is the "Hollywood/predictable" aspect of the series - every episode's conflicts resolve mostly to the benefit or good-fortune of JJ. At the end of the series, the good guy gets the girl and the princess finds the prince, or whatever fairytale ending you would choose to substitute. Sure, the show is a situation comedy, and the audience is mostly looking for a pressure valve to diffuse problems, but

the lack of reality in some respects does not make the series have any impact. There are a lot of issues touched here, which could be drilled into for some reality, but the easier sell is to side-step the difficult story. Access in international travel is treated like a mere inconvenience in season three, episodes one and two, *L-O-N--LONDON*, versus the reality of travelling abroad, especially in an old country such as England. The cobblestone streets are quaint but make traveling while in a wheelchair a hazard. Rather than having an earnest look into insurance issues such as disabled people have to constantly negotiate or beg for everything from non-durable/disposable medical supplies to durable needs like wheelchairs, they portray the insurance fight as a game in season one, episode twelve, *H-E-R-HERO*.

The disabled family image - this is hinted at in a few places. As Jimmy puts it, families with a disabled person are a mess, and society shouldn't expect much of families with a disabled child in season one, episode two, *N-E-NEW A-I-AIDE*. Maya and the model mother of a disabled child butt heads because Maya thinks the "perfect" mom makes her look bad in season one, episode sixteen, *O-S- OSCAR P-A- PARTY*. Instead of Maya using the experience to become a better time manager, house manager, JJ manager, etc., she blames the ideal picture of a mother with a disabled child. What *Speechless* also fails to do in regard to the disabled family image is to point out the reality of how hard life is for families that have fewer resources. Everything is more expensive; insurance, whether private or state-run, is a minefield; social security assistance is never enough; and being poor and always wanting takes a tangible mental toll on parents and children.

JJ's image with his peers in school is problematic, because it is not realistic. The kids at school go out of their way to include JJ in all aspects of high school life.

Everybody likes JJ, and JJ is admired. This is low-key disability porn in disguise.

Although not a part of the literature review or the subject of this study, a brief mention of Terror Management Theory (TMT) needs to be mentioned. Terror Management Theory suggests that when a person sees something that reminds them of the fragility of life and the unpredictable nature of the genetic lottery, this produces terror in people (Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T. & Solomon, S., 1986). People manage this terror relying on their self-esteem to cope with the resulting anxiety from the terror produced (Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T. & Solomon, S., 1986). In considering *Speechless* in light of TMT, JJ is a constant reminder that sometimes life doesn't work out the way you hoped and that your own life is fragile. The self-esteem a person would use to manage this terror is simply the easiest one: you remove the reminder from your life. You don't want to feel terror? Don't hang around with JJ. And yet, by the end of the first episode, season one, episode one, *P-IPILOT*, Kenneth has convinced JJ's high school to vote for him for student body president. Later in the series, JJ has a high school romance with Izzy (mentioned above), with whom he plans on attending college, but for the ending of the series.

The last problem to mention is the hardest one, and that is the writing of the show. *Speechless* was a good idea, but the yearning for ratings was the downfall of the series. The first season is the best season of the show, as it takes the most realistic view of life with a disabled person in a family. Season two starts off fine, but the show devolves pretty quickly into themed episodes and celebrity tie-ins. The Halloween show, season one, episode five, *H-A-L-HALLOWEEN* is fairly typical, so it gets a pass. But Maya hiring a helicopter to fly to JJ's summer camp to say goodbye in season one, episode twenty-three, *C-A-CAMP* is nothing but a spectacle. On a baggage handler's salary, no

less. Not buying that one. The Star Wars tie-in during season two, episode nine, *S-T-STAR W-A-WARS* when Kevin Smith just happens to be at the movie theatre where JJ is for the movie premiere is very hard to believe. Involving John Cleese as Maya's father in a two-episode arc in England for Maya to mend a fence with, season three, episodes one and two, *L-O-N--LONDON* was a noble attempt to engage viewers, but even John Cleese can't save the episodes.

By the end of the series, the reliance on the fairytale ending to every episode was tiresome. There is a definite shift in the writing somewhere toward the end of the second season, and the third season is basically inspiration porn. I guess the idea was to get the ratings higher, but the celebrity tie-ins and fairytale sheen remind me of another series that had a lead character jumping a shark on a motorcycle in a later episode. Sadly, by the end of the series, and certainly the last episode of the series, *Speechless* "jumped the shark."

## CHAPTER IV – “DUDE, NOBODY’S NORMAL”’: READING *ATYPICAL*

### Introduction

Netflix has its own entry in the race to find the above mentioned “Cosby Moment” regarding disability culture in the dramedy, *Atypical*. The initial reviews on *Atypical* ran the gamut, being heralded by TV critic Merrill Barr (2017) as “the best original series that Netflix has ever produced,” to being slammed by autistic actor Mickey Rowe (2017) for having a neurotypical actor, Keir Gilchrist, play the lead role of Sam Gardner, and for the creative team not including anyone on the autism spectrum. Unlike Scot Silveri, creator Robia Rashid does not have a family member on the autism spectrum as the impetus for creating a show with a disabled lead character but has stated that she has experience with someone on the autism spectrum (Fernandez, 2017).

While *Atypical* has a lot in common with *Speechless*, the biggest difference, from a presentation and storytelling standpoint, is that *Atypical* is not delivered by a terrestrial television network but is produced and distributed by Netflix. Fans of the show might purposefully make the decision to watch the show by subscribing to the service versus the possibility that some viewers of *Speechless* might watch out of convenience. When the new season of a show is delivered by Netflix, the entire season is available immediately, often causing fans of a show to watch an entire season of programming in a weekend rather than having to wait weekly for a new episode. The “binge-watching” aspect allows many Netflix series to engage with the audience very differently than a typical television series. Each season of a Netflix show operates more like an extended movie. Many plot elements take several episodes to develop and resolve on most Netflix series, while

typical sitcoms develop a conflict and resolve it in twenty-two minutes with little carry-over.

### Season One, Episode One, *Antarctica*

Season one, episode one, *Antarctica*, starts with Sam mechanically narrating about Antarctica. “That’s why I like it. It’s not what it looks like,” is self-referential in that people perceive Sam as a “weirdo,” but he is just a boy navigating life. In reality, Sam is mechanically snapping a rubber band he is holding with a pencil sitting in his therapist’s office. Sam is talking to his therapist, Julia, and mentions that he would like to study Antarctica and awkwardly blurts out, “I can see your bra. It's purple.” Immediately reinforcing three stereotypical personality aspects that are foisted on people on the autism spectrum: obsession over a specific topic, in Sam’s case, Antarctica; a lack of personal boundaries; and self-motor stimulation. Sam narrates often what is in his head, typically to set up a joke or to give more insight into his character. While riding the bus home later, Sam narrates that some tactile sensations, like a bus seat pressing on his back, are annoying, thereby enforcing another stereotype aimed at people on the autistic spectrum, extreme texture or stimulation aversion or attraction.

The episode cuts to Sam at home with his family to eat dinner with his mother Elsa, father Doug, and sister Casey. With the family at the dinner table, a couple of series elements unfold: Elsa is controlling and protective of Sam; Casey, Sam’s sports star younger sister, is often overlooked and in Sam’s shadow; and the writers use Sam’s autism to make inappropriate jokes about everything from death to relationships. At four minutes into the first episode of *Atypical*, many stereotypes about people on the autism spectrum are enforced. Nothing but the therapist hints at the medical model of

disabilities, and only a fleeting sideways glance from a bus passenger when Sam rambles aloud about Antarctica approaches the social model of disabilities.

As the episode continues, Sam goes to school, noise-cancelling headphones in place, narrating about his life there and about girls, with his goal to obtain a girlfriend. Then a cut to Sam's job, at an electronic store, Techtropolis, where we meet his girl-crazy "friend" and co-worker, Zahid. Cut to Sam in his room, taking a very awkward "selfie" and setting up a digital dating profile. Casey, his well-meaning and caring younger sister, thinks the idea is funny, but "helps" Sam by writing his profile as if Sam is a neurotypical high school senior. Elsa appears and attempts to dissuade Sam from online dating, once again attempting to commandeer Sam's life.

Elsa then goes to Sam's therapist, Julia, who also teaches psychology at a local college, to confront her about suggesting Sam seek a girlfriend. Julia points out that people on the autistic spectrum are less likely to marry, but she could give Sam strategies to navigate dating. Elsa says she believes that Sam's inability to read people is "magnified" by dating, and Sam is not ready to pursue a relationship with a female, which really means that she does not want to deal with Sam pursuing a relationship with a female, in essence.

Sam is in his room, researching dating a woman online. Of course, since the series has already enforced Sam's lack of nuance regarding behavior and language, Sam takes everything peddled by every digital pick-up artist, as well as typical high school students at his school, as reliable and proper. The episode moves forward to Sam at work, with Zahid suggesting he flirt with a customer. Sam's awkward, toothy smile scares off the customer thereby ending any possible interaction, with Zahid noting the failure to Sam.

The next scene is back to high school, but this time from Casey's perspective. A couple of girls are bullying another girl, Beth Chapin, and Casey gets involved by punching one of the female bullies in the face. Cut to home, and another dinner preparation, where Elsa is lecturing Casey about the interaction, which further drives the obvious wedge into Casey and Elsa's relationship. Casey declares that the person she hit is a "twat." Sam starts narrating that sometimes he will obsess on a word, which is to set up his internal dialog repeating "twat" in various ways, once again using a stereotypical autistic spectrum behavior, echolalia, or repeating words, as a vehicle for humor. Beth Chapin, the girl Casey defended from the bullying, and her older brother chauffeur Evan, show up at the Gardner home with a cake to thank Casey. Sam busts open the front door of the house and yells "TWAT!" at Beth and Evan. Evan is shocked and asks "what the hell is wrong with him?" to which Casey defensively steps in and says, "Hey, nothing's wrong with him. Get away from him." Casey wrangles Sam inside, and leaves the Chapins confused outside. Inside, Casey slaps Sam on the back of the head and calls him an "asshole." Sam then narrates that Casey will constantly defend him and won't let anyone hurt him, "except herself."

Sam is next in an appointment with Julia, running down his life since they last interacted. Sam related that he is still looking for a relationship, he scared off the girl at work, and Sam ends by saying "and we had meatloaf twice, and I hate meatloaf." Julia asks "How?" obviously to inquire as to how Sam scared off the girl at work, but literal Sam answers, "My mom just made it in the oven." Once again using a version of the Abbot and Costello "Who's on First" routine to elicit laughter at Sam's literal nature, which is used a lot. But the show is a *dramedy*, so the comedy aspect is natural, although

the laughter is typically at Sam's expense. At any rate, Sam shows Julia his awkward, toothy smile that scared the customer off. Julia suggests a less intense smile to avoid being seen as "creepy."

Back at the Gardner home, Evan stops by with the motive of retrieving Beth's cake pan. Casey sees through the veiled attempt, especially when Evan asks her to "go out." Casey states that she is very focused on running, but Evan suggests that he will change her mind. Sam busts up the conversation by excitedly stating that someone has replied to his dating profile and wants to meet. The potential paramour, Bree, suggests meeting Sam for coffee, which upsets Sam, as social gatherings offer a variable that Sam cannot control, such as a noisy coffee shop. Sam is shown in Julia's office and speaks about having a "strategy" to overcome the variable, but it is not clear if Julia is actually there. Often, Sam's narration that appears initially to be non-diegetic is often Sam visibly talking in Julia's office, which is obviously diegetic. At other times Sam speaks non-diegetically as internal narration. As the series progresses, Sam's narration is always from his seat in Julia's office, which is somewhat strange, as Sam and Julia part ways later in the series. Sam's "strategy" to overcome the noisy coffee shop atmosphere is to wear his noise-cancelling headphones. Of course, Sam looks very awkward trying to make conversation with Bree, who in turn also looks awkward. Sam's toothy, awkward smile makes an appearance, and Sam tries mimicking the online pick-up artists and would-be Romeos he saw at school. The date crumbles from there, and although the eventual outcome is not shown, the obvious message is that the date was a failure.

At Sam's work, Zahid asks about Sam's love life, and Sam responds by saying he is no longer interested in a relationship because of his experience and that he is "weird."

Zahid responds, “so what.” And that really distills the entire series: people are weird, and so what. The customer Sam scared away comes back in, and Zahid suggests Sam ask her out. Sam’s direct, literal approach to the customer is a success, and the celebration with Zahid is funny and endearing.

Sam and Riley, the customer, end up eating pizza at the break table at Techtropolis on the eventual date, a place where Sam is comfortable and in control. This seems odd to Riley, who tells Sam that she thought Sam was joking when he made that suggestion, to which Sam answers, “I don’t do that.” Riley finds Sam’s lack of a facade and complete honesty “refreshing” and “hilarious.” Sam mentions that he has never had sexual intercourse, and Riley takes that as a cue to take Sam’s virgin card.

Sam and Riley end up in Riley’s dorm room sitting on Riley’s bed, with her intention to have sex with Sam. Sam, being completely inexperienced and awkward, really doesn’t know where to begin, but narrates that light pressure bothers him, but heavy pressure is fine. Riley, of course, attempting to be sexual, lightly rubs up Sam’s arm and attempts to rub his face. Sam’s aversion to the light touching causes him to violently throw Riley off the bed. Riley is shocked, Sam immediately apologizes, but Riley asks “What is wrong with you? Seriously, are you retarded? Is there something wrong with your brain?” Sam stands there, but it is obvious that Riley’s accusations hurt him. Riley throws him out of her dorm room, and Sam is seen presumably walking home. Sam appears at home while Evan and Casey are talking outside. An obviously upset Sam goes inside, followed by Casey and Evan. Sam says, “Sometimes I wish I was normal.” Evan replies, “Dude, nobody’s normal,” which reaches back to Zahid’s earlier sentiment to Sam.

Doug and Sam are then shown at the aquarium looking at the penguins. Doug tries bonding with Sam over his recent failed romantic interlude. Sam states he wished he had a time machine, he would go back and not ask the girl out, but also that he would go to the middle-ages “because, jousting.” Doug expresses that he is proud of Sam for working on a relationship with a woman, and that while the immediate situation was a failure, Sam will figure romantic relationships out. Doug also nails down the series message again when he suggests that Sam will find someone who understands and loves all of Sam’s personality, and Sam should not be worried about being different. Sam mentions that penguins mate for life to Doug, which is a harbinger for things to come in the series, and an obviously affected Doug says “good for them.”

Back in the office with Julia, Sam tells her that Doug told him that he should “find someone that appreciates me for what I am, which is a weirdo.” Sam also mentions that he had talked a lot with Doug, and it seems that Sam and Doug are coming to a turning point in their relationship, as Sam seems to trust Doug’s advice. This plot point is Sam expressing his desire for Elsa to stop being so controlling, but this will be more obvious later. Sam expresses a story through non-diegetic narration that a certain penguin’s mating ritual is to present a gift to his potential mate, and if the female penguin accepts the gift, the pair are coupled for life. At the very first of this episode, Julia asks if Sam would donate his brain for research after his death, something Elsa vehemently objected to at dinner. It becomes apparent that Sam now sees Julia as his next romantic conquest, because Sam uses his decision to offer his brain for research as equivalent to the penguin presenting a potential mate with a gift. Sam tells Julia he would like to donate his brain for research, but says “Julia, I’ve decided I want to give you my brain.”

Julia expresses happiness for the decision, and Sam seems to take that as she accepted his mating gift.

*Atypical*'s first episode, like any first episode, gives the viewer a broad sketch of the major characters that live in the show's world. The overbearing, commanding Elsa, the lovable oaf Doug, the athletic younger sister, Casey, and the star of the series, Sam. Much of the first season presents Sam as what television critic Leslie Felperin (2017) refers to as "a human whiteboard illustrating the triad of impairments" regarding someone on the autism spectrum. Sam's rapid-fire conversation, lack of nuance in social situations, and his obsession with all things Antarctic, seem to be directly out of any college psychology textbook (Felperin, 2017). Felperin (2017) also points out how much the writers for *Atypical* present the rest of the Gardner family as still learning about Sam after eighteen years. A lot of the episode is used to educate the audience about people on the spectrum of autism, and seemingly Robia Rashid seems to have decided to bludgeon Sam with every stereotype of people on the autistic spectrum.

The first season of *Atypical* is pretty much episodic, in that the shows move through an issue in approximately thirty minutes and the conflict situation is done. In the subsequent seasons, Rashid adopts the more popular approach of other digital streaming series, as a season develops as an extended episode approach. This allows for deeper character development and more nuanced and complex stories to be offered.

With that in mind, another change is that Rashid enlisted the services of Dr. Michelle Dean, a former employee of UCLA's Center for Autism and Research and Treatment, as a consultant on the show (Thaxton, 2017). There is no timeline available to determine when Dean became involved with *Atypical*, but beginning in the second season

depiction of people on the autism spectrum became more realistic and less like a college psychology textbook. In addition, after the inclusion of Dean, more actors on the autism spectrum were cast in the series. The disability model also seemed to shift from the medical model to the social model after the first season, too. While there are still plenty of issues to be seen in seasons two and three, season one is rife with stereotypes and uneven representations of the autism spectrum. This chapter is organized by stereotypes and the ways in which *Atypical* either enforces or breaks from those stereotypes. In addition, the medical and social models will be discussed in a section after the stereotypes are discussed.

### Stereotypes of Disability in *Atypical*

#### *Classic Stereotypes of Disability: Pity, Evil/Fear, and Super Gimp*

While these are touched on in *Atypical*, they aren't present in many episodes of the series. But as early as season one, episode two, *A Human Female*, Sam narrates that when he was angry or anxious as a younger person, his typical behavior would be self-harm, by banging his head or yelling. On-screen, as a teenager, he is shown furiously pacing around his bedroom as a replacement behavior for self-harm. Doug comes in and suggests that he and Sam talk, but Sam states that he should "talk to mom," since Elsa has always been very engaged in Sam's life. Doug tells Sam that "that's usually how things work around here," but then goes on to tell Sam that Elsa is at her autism support group's meeting, and that Doug might have something useful to say about Sam's situation.

Sam relents, and tells Doug he likes "a girl," but Sam does not say that the girl he likes is Julia Sasaki, his therapist. Sam only says that "she" has a boyfriend, "stupid

Miles.” Not knowing the situation, Doug suggests that Sam should be persistent, and he might be able to steal the girl away from her boyfriend. Doug still does not know that Sam is talking about Julia, though. Had Doug known that Sam was interested in Julia, he could have stopped Sam from the huge series of events that is to come. As the conversation comes to a close, Doug remarks that “this went well,” and Sam agrees, which also sets up another change that is to come in the series, and that is Sam relying on Doug rather than Elsa for support, as well as Doug taking a more active interest in Sam, too. This stereotype enforces the classic pity for a disabled character stereotype, as someone that self-harms and has no sense of boundaries would elicit pity from many typical people. This also enforces that many people on the autistic spectrum lash out or engage in self-harm when there is a stressful situation, or the person has a seizure. This scene touches on Barnes’s disability representation stereotypes of a disabled person as a burden, as Sam must always be supervised. Sam is shown as not understanding boundaries, too, when it comes to a romantic relationship in that a high school male his adult female therapist represents the disabled character as sexually inappropriate.

Season one, episode three, *Julia Says*, continues with Sam’s interest in a romantic relationship with Julia. Sam’s narration is musing about the concept of practice makes perfect, with the intention of getting a practice girlfriend with the eventual goal of Julia being his girlfriend. Sam’s first attempt at a practice girlfriend is someone that he was in school with during elementary school. He awkwardly tries to ask her out, and after a couple of rejections from the girl, he tells her that she would be his “practice girlfriend, the person I really like is Julia, my therapist, if that makes it any better.” The girl responds with “it makes it worse” before telling Sam “you’re really weird.” This casts

Sam in the pitiable stereotype in that people would look at the situation and pity Sam for being so awkward and inept with females as well as generally with life. The underlying comedy of the moment oversteps that, which is common in *Atypical*. The comedy in *Atypical*, especially in the first season, often happens at the expense of Sam, most often because of his inability to communicate well enough to understand metaphors or jokes, which squarely hits Barnes's stereotype of a disabled representation as the object of ridicule, discussed further below.

The pitiable stereotype appears in season one, episode four, *A Nice Neutral Smell*, as Sam, Doug, and Elsa are attending a track meet to watch Casey run. Elsa leaves Sam and Doug to retrieve her cell phone, which she dropped below the stadium bleachers. Sam has on noise cancelling headphones, to mask the crowd noise. As the race starts, everyone stands up, and a girl standing in front of Sam keeps tossing her head around. Her hair is brushing Sam's face, and Sam's aversion to being lightly touched is highlighted. Sam's narration is pointing out that the deadliest creature on the planet is the mosquito, which is "annoying." Sam then grabs the girl's ponytail. Doug tries to get Sam's hand off of the girl's hair, and when he succeeds, Sam falls, cutting his arm on the bleacher's edge. This is a combination stereotype here, as someone could believe that people on the autistic spectrum are evil, as well as pitiable in that Sam can't even attend a sporting event without supervision. This scene also fits the disability equals burden stereotype, in that everyone in Sam's life has to supervise him to prevent Sam from reacting to something in a violent or inappropriate manner.

The pitiable stereotype continues in this episode, too, with Sam sitting in the hall of his school. Paige Hardison, a classmate, is interested in Sam romantically, so she

walks up to engage in conversation with him, but Sam points out he has on noise-cancelling headphones. Paige gets Sam to take them off and asks if he would be interested in studying together for a biology test as a ploy to spend some time with Sam. Sam asks, “Why would I want to do that?” and mentions that his current grade in biology is an “A” while Paige has an “A-,” so studying with Paige would be of no benefit. Sam then puts his headphones back on his ears. This hints at the disabled people are pitiable stereotype, because Sam’s lack of communication and language nuance causes him to not recognize that Paige is flirting with him. This also enforces the disabled as sexually abnormal stereotype, in that a typical boy would possibly want to spend time with an attractive girl that is seemingly interested in him.

There are few instances where the representation stereotype of the disabled equals evil or villainous stereotype, but they are notable. In season one, episode two, *A Human Female*, Doug drives Sam to Julia and Miles’ house, unknown to Doug, for Sam to deliver chocolate covered strawberries to Julia. It is at night, and the house is dark. Sam knows from his previous interactions with Julia that she is not fond of the doorbell, so he opens the window and climbs through. This is not very realistic, as not only is the window unlocked, but Sam would surely know better than to break into someone’s house. Doug runs to retrieve Sam from Julia and Miles’ house, and on the way out, Sam stumbles and a chocolate covered strawberry falls out of the container and rolls under a chair. The scene sets up a huge event in the series, and it is all predicated on the strawberry. This seems like lazy writing. Although people on the autism spectrum might not recognize appropriate behavior or communicate as a typical person might, someone portrayed as high functioning as Sam would know better than to break into someone’s

house. Sam finally tells Doug that Julia is the object of his affections as Doug is getting Sam to leave the house. Sam narrates that in the animal world, mating is innate, but “it’s us humans that make it complicated.” That enforces the disabled person as sexually abnormal, pitiable, and unable to fit into typical life.

Later in that episode, Doug and Sam have another talk, as Doug is finally fully informed about Sam’s intent to steal Julia away from Miles. Doug tells Sam he should stop seeking to have a relationship with Julia, not only because of the inherent conflict of interest but also that Sam should date someone his own age. Sam suggests “like a practice girlfriend before I date Julia.” Doug only says, “I wouldn’t call it that.” Surely Doug would know about Sam’s tendency to obsess over something and misunderstanding of language cues after eighteen years. Sam tells a story of an Antarctic adventurer making practice excursions before tackling exploring Antarctica, so Sam should get a practice girlfriend to prepare for Julia.

Doug suggests that Sam find a girl his own age, without fully extinguishing Sam’s desire for Julia. Sam tells Doug, “That’s excellent advice.” For Sam, though, the door is still open for a relationship with Julia. Sam closes by asking Doug if he is going to tell Elsa about the event. Doug asks, “Do you want me too?” To which Sam replies, “No, thank you.” Doug obviously wants to have that connection with Sam grow, so he does not betray Sam’s wishes. Of course, Doug should have told Elsa, as she would have made the situation with Julia implicit and would have had Sam change therapists immediately, which is probably what should have happened. This is once again very stereotypical, and the show is using Sam’s inability to communicate typically, to read cues, or to understand boundaries. Sam’s representation of a person on the autism spectrum is used to drive a

major plot point. It seems very exploitative and wrong to use a disability as a plot point on a series, especially a very negative and destructive plot point, discussed further below.

In season one, episode four, *Julia Says*, while in her office waiting for Sam, Julia is on the phone with Miles. Miles has sent Julia a bunch of flowers, and Julia is thanking Miles on the phone, while stating that while the flowers are pretty, the flowers don't explain how the chocolate covered strawberry that Sam dropped in their house got there. Julia believes that Miles must have dropped it, and since Julia was not aware that Miles purchased chocolate covered strawberries, Julia leaps to the conclusion that Miles must be having an affair with another woman. Julia states, "It's a sex fruit, Miles." This sets up Miles moving out of the house, and all because of Sam's inappropriate behavior. While not a purposeful incident by Sam to derail Julia and Miles, it does touch the disabled equals evil or villainous stereotype as well as disabled people not being able to fit into typical life.

The disabled representation stereotype super cripp makes an appearance in *Atypical*, in season one episode four, *A Nice Neutral Smell*, when Sam walks into Julia's office, he notices the flowers that Miles bought her, remarking that he should have gotten her favorite flower, "ranunculus." Julia says, "I can't believe you remembered that" suggesting it must have come up in a previous therapy session with Sam, which supports the "savant-like" memory stereotype that some people associate with people on the autism spectrum. This also enforces the super gimp stereotype in that despite Sam's disability, he has an encyclopedic memory.

Super cripp makes an appearance in season two, episode four, *Pants on Fire*. In the episode, Sam is talking with Ms. Whitaker, his high school's guidance counsellor. Sam's

focus in this episode is a college entrance essay. Sam is shown in Ms. Whitaker's office, and she is reading from Sam's essay, which she does not believe is very good. Sam's essay is about his biggest accomplishment, which he claims is seeing an exotic dancer's "boobies" in anticipation of being intimate with Paige in the first season. Sam argues that he believes the event is one of "his greatest accomplishments," however. Ms.

Whitaker also tells Sam that he also wrote about not participating in any extracurricular activities and did not take gym because the mesh shorts "ride up your butt." The stereotypes at play here are that disabled people are sexually abnormal, engage in inappropriate behavior, as well as Sam's disability being a butt of the joke. This is a setup for Ms. Whitaker painting Sam with the super cripple stereotype.

Ms. Whitaker asks Sam why he wrote about those things in the essay, and Sam says, "because it's true." Ms. Whitaker tells Sam that in a college entrance essay, truth is not as important as writing something "appropriate." Ms. Whitaker suggests that Sam write about dealing with life so well as someone on the autism spectrum as Sam is a "real success story." Sam says that "autism isn't an accomplishment, it's something I was born with." Ms. Whitaker is characterizing Sam with the super cripple stereotype in that he is disabled, but he is accomplishing great feats, like graduating high school and holding a regular job. Sam sees that Ms. Whitaker is aggrandizing what Sam sees as typical, and suggests that Ms. Whitaker wouldn't write about having "ten fingers and ten toes, would you?" This is an interesting situation, because on one hand, *Atypical* is hinting at the "super cripple" stereotype but acknowledging the society model of disability in that society is tough to navigate for someone on the autism spectrum, just as it is for someone with a mobility impairment or any number of other disabilities. Navigating life as someone on

the autism spectrum, especially a higher functioning person like Sam, is certainly more difficult than a typical person because society is not readily accessible for any type of disability, but this is discussed below.

In season two, episode eight, *Living at an Angle*, at the suggestion of Ms. Whitaker, Sam compiles his notebook drawings into a formal portfolio to use as part of his college application. Sam's drawings are great, which paints Sam's representation with a little bit of the super-gimp stereotype meets savant ability that some people ascribe to people on the autism spectrum. Sam is accepted to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). Sam is anxious because RISD is on a hill, and he "doesn't like the idea of living at an angle," the menu at the cafeteria doesn't have "chicken fingers," and many artists die "penniless and alone," but he was trying to be optimistic. In that scene, in addition to the super crip nod, *Atypical* is once again using Sam's disability as a joke, by using Sam's inherent characteristic of literal language interpretation as the joke rather than Sam being in on the joke.

#### *Disability or Disabled Person as the Object of Ridicule*

This stereotype, as mentioned above, is when a person's disability is used as the object of ridicule, or the behavior of a disabled person is the punchline of a joke. *Atypical* is guilty of using this stereotype most often, and generally because people on the autism spectrum typically do have trouble with language and communication. Interactions that require a more nuanced level of communication, such as sarcasm, colloquial phrases and non-standard word usage might be a problem for some people on the autism spectrum, but not all. The Sam character, however, does have problems with understanding nuance

and takes what people say very literally. This stereotype is used heavily in the first season, but it also is present in subsequent seasons, too.

In season one, episode two, *A Human Female*, Sam starts caring about his appearance more because he wants Julia to be his girlfriend. During the first season, Doug and Sam's interactions are distant, and Doug is portrayed as not being able to successfully communicate with Sam. However, after 18 years, how could Doug still not know how to interact with Sam? Most often, Sam is the butt of a language misunderstanding that plays out some variation of the Abbott and Costello burlesque comedy classic skit, "Who's on First." Sam ends up the butt of the joke because he is taking something someone says literally versus understanding that the person is joking or using a euphemism. In this episode, Doug tells Sam he was "cock of the walk" because of Sam's new concern about his hair and looks. Sam replies "That makes no sense. I look nothing like a rooster. Roosters don't even have hair, they have a cockscomb, which is fleshy."

Later in that episode, Sam is at his job at Techtropolis. Doug has earlier suggested that he stole Elsa away from someone, and not knowing that Sam was asking about Julia, Doug suggests that Sam could steal a girl away from a suitor. Zahid says that Doug's advice is good, and that Sam's love interest is fair game until marriage. Zahid also does not know that Sam has a romantic interest in Julia. Sam's narration expresses a desire to be "smooth, like Zahid." Zahid is boorish and crude, but Sam is enamored with Zahid's tales of romantic encounters and bravado, which Sam believes that is how typical males behave. Sam asks Zahid about how to steal a girl, and Zahid replies "get a GPS, because I'm taking you to poon city," Sam states that poon city is "not a real place." Zahid

suggests Sam should be “hella charming,” find out what Julia doesn’t like about Miles, and Sam should get Julia “chocolate covered strawberries.” The scene cuts back and forth to Sam in Julia’s office attempting to be “hella charming” with a story about Antarctica, and then asking for a list of Miles “three biggest weaknesses,” but she could include more than three. This is also part of the chain of terrible events that is to come.

In season one, episode three, *Julia Says*, Sam is still concerned with his appearance and goes to the mall with Elsa and Zahid. Sam finds a blue t-shirt that he points out has “eight Antarctic whales on it” as well as a leather jacket, at Zahid’s advice. Sam tells Zahid he hates the leather jacket, and that it “doesn’t feel like me.” Zahid tells him “you’re trying to get girls, the last thing you want to be is yourself.” On the ride home, Elsa asks Sam if he really wants a girlfriend and whether he is afraid of “getting hurt.” Sam jokes “not unless I date a great white shark,” which is a positive interaction because Sam is in on the joke instead of being the butt of a joke he doesn’t understand. As the discussion continues, Sam mentions that he is getting older, and “I really, really hope I get to see boobs.” Which is inappropriate, but funny, leaving Elsa speechless. Directly after a positive representation the writers jump into another joke with Sam’s inappropriate behavior as the punchline.

Later in the same episode, Sam has on the whale t-shirt and the leather jacket at school. You sense from his mannerisms the jacket is bothering him. The sound of the leather rubbing together produces a loud squeak, and the buckles and zippers are clanging on the metal desk. Sam narrates, “When a lobster gets too large for its shell, it molts. When a snake is feeling a growth spurt, it sheds.” This is setting up a metaphor and an action. Sam is growing more independent and needs to shed his skin in the series, but also

Sam is uncomfortable in the leather jacket. Sam gets out of his desk, very fast and flustered, to throw the leather jacket in the garbage, narrating “sometimes you have to get rid of your outer layer.” The class grinds to a stop and the students and teacher stare at Sam. The teacher finally asks, “Is everything ok?” Sam replies, “Yes, thank you.” This is a little bit of the stereotype of a disabled person not being able to participate in a typical life, but also Sam’s sensory issues that are a part of his disability are the butt of the physical humor.

Later in that episode, Paige makes an entrance into the series. Paige is hopelessly nerdy, makes flawless grades, is cute, and is interested romantically in Sam. Paige tells Sam, “I like your shirt.” Earlier in the episode, Casey told Sam, “nice shirt.” When Sam thanks her, Casey says, “I was being sarcastic.” Remembering that, Sam asks Paige “are you being sarcastic?” Paige says no, and Sam tells her “then thank you” before walking away. This hints at the stereotype of disabled people being sexually abnormal by Sam continually not picking up on Paige’s flirtation, and also uses Sam as the object of ridicule in that he completely misses the point of Paige’s interaction.

In season one, episode six, *The D-Train to Bonetown*, Sam tells Zahid that Paige wants to go to the winter formal, which Sam says sounds “dumb.” Paige told Sam he could “come over” afterward, as Paige’s parents will be out of town. Zahid tells Sam that Paige wants to have sex with him. Sam is skeptical, but Zahid tells him that “‘come over’ is ladytalk for have sex.” Sam says he will ask Paige if that was her intention, and Zahid says that Sam shouldn’t. When Sam is with Paige next, he asks her if “come over” actually meant that she wanted to have sex with him. Paige acts very awkward and stutters “maybe.” Zahid tells Sam that “in this case, maybe means yes” which Sam again

clarifies with Paige. Sam then says that “the proposition of sex makes the dance more worthwhile.” Admittedly, it was very funny watching Sam be inappropriate and directly asking Paige to clarify if she wanted to have sex with him, but this is completely making Sam the object of ridicule in this scenario.

Many of the interactions with Sam are in the “Who’s on First” vein, although sometimes his behavior is used as the punchline. Using Sam’s innate behavior characteristics as a joke pretty much stops after the first season, but the language misinterpretations continue through all of the seasons. Later in the series, Sam’s communication and use of language gets better, and he makes a few jokes of his own. As mentioned above, Robia Rashid hired a consultant with a background in autistic spectrum research. Although the timeline was not found as to when the consultant was hired, the representations and ridicule of Sam’s behavior are toned down in the second season and beyond.

#### *Disabled People are Sexually Abnormal*

As mentioned above, Barnes’s characterization of this stereotype is society’s incorrect presumptions about sexuality and disability. Virtually the entire story of *Atypical*, especially in season one, revolves around Sam wanting to be involved in a romantic relationship with a girl. This section dissects Sam and his desire to be romantically involved with Julia, his therapist.

Among the college textbook characteristics of someone on the autism spectrum that Sam is given in the first episode, the episode ends with Sam agreeing to give Julia his brain for research after Sam dies. Sam internally sees that as a male penguin’s gift to a female penguin as part of a mating ritual, and Julia’s acceptance as her interest in Sam.

In season one, episode two, *A Human Female*, Sam is in Julia's office, where his narration describes how he is researching Julia for her relationship potential by getting her input about "important" things, like her favorite lemonade, whether Julia likes movies, her fears, her favorite "winter sports." Sam also discovers that Julia has a romantic partner, Miles. Julia is oblivious to why Sam is questioning her, mentioning that it is good that Sam is taking an interest in someone besides himself, as that is something that Sam usually does not engage in with other people. While showing Sam as sexually abnormal, this is also enforcing a typical trait of someone on the autism spectrum, being self-centered.

Later, in season one, episode four, *A Nice Neutral Smell*, Julia asks Sam about how his conquest for a romantic relationship is proceeding, Sam answers "Bad. Bad, bad, bad." He then relates that most girls ignore him, "except Paige." Julia asks Sam about Paige, who Sam describes as "an annoying girl who's always bothering me when I'm wearing my headphones, and she wants me to study with her, even though we're both getting As." Julia suggests that Paige might be interested in a romantic relationship to Sam. Sam, seemingly surprised, replies, "Oh. I guess I should make her my girlfriend, then." Julia points out that Sam just described her as annoying, to which Sam replies, "Does that matter?" Julia says that Sam should figure out if he likes Paige, although Sam says that he doesn't know how to make that decision. Julia tells Sam to "get to know her better and weigh the pros and cons." Sam says that is what he did when trying to decide on getting a pet, "but I'll never find a girlfriend as good as Edison," which is Sam's pet turtle's name.

As mentioned above in this episode, Sam tells Doug he likes “a girl,” but Sam does not say that his intended relationship subject is Julia. As mentioned, Doug suggests that Sam should be persistent and available. Then comes Sam’s quest for a “practice girlfriend” for eventually being romantically involved with Julia. Sam breaks into Julia and Miles’ house and drops the chocolate covered strawberry. Sam confides in Doug that he is interested in Julia, which Doug does not effectively eliminate from Sam’s relationship intentions.

In the middle of the Julia romance saga, part of the Paige story fits, as Sam is battling at this point over whether he loves Paige or Julia. Paige surprises Sam by telling him that she loves him. Sam is concerned because he doesn’t know if he loves Paige, Zahid tells Sam that “you just know.” Later, Sam then asks Elsa how she knew she loved Doug. Elsa tells Sam that she knew because Doug was the first thing she thought about when she woke up. Upon asking Doug, Doug said that Elsa “makes him a better person,” Sam makes a checklist for Paige with their answers. Elsa offers another characteristic of love is that the person you love “is your go-to person” in any situation, to which Doug agreed. The next morning, Sam wakes up and thinks about Paige, and checks that box on his love list. Sam decides that Paige makes him less “annoying” so that checks the “makes me a better person” box. Later at work, Sam decides he should tell Paige about a sale at Techtropolis, which checks his “first person you want to tell good news to” box. In Sam’s mind, since Paige checked all the boxes for loving someone, he decides he loves Paige, and tells her so.

Due to Sam’s dropped strawberry, Julia eventually drives Miles out of her life with her suspicions. Julia, in need of a television after Miles moved out and took the one

in their house, shows up at Techtropolis to pick-up one she previously purchased. Julia looks like a complete mess and is embarrassed after seeing Sam there. Sam gets Julia's television, and puts it in her car. Julia thanks him and tells Sam that seeing him "made my day." Sam responds that Julia has "made his day" a lot of times, so I guess this is me paying you back." Sam also tells Julia he is looking forward to their next session because he has a lot of things to talk to her about.

Julia asks about the dance and if Sam is nervous about dancing. Sam says he learned "hip hop" dancing while watching his sister's dance class as a child, and proceeds to demonstrate his dance moves. Predictably, Sam's moves are awkward and stiff, but he does say he is nervous about slow dancing. Julia tries to show Sam how to slow dance, the perspectives on the event from "reality" and Sam are very different: Sam sees Julia dressed very well and they dancing was very romantic; while in reality, as mentioned, Julia is not well dressed and looks a mess, and the slow dancing was stiff and awkward, as expected. After the encounter, his list about Paige and loving her are dropped, and Sam mentions that Zahid's advice was right in that "sometimes you just know," and instead of being in love with Paige, he actually loves Julia.

Later in the episode, Sam is at a restaurant with Paige and all of her family, and his inner dialog is just repeating 'Julia' over and over. Sam awkwardly yells "Julia!" at the table, which stops the conversations taking place. Sam turns to Paige and says, "Paige, I'm sorry to inform you of this, but I shouldn't be here because I don't love you." Paige is confused and asks Sam "what?" Sam states that he thought he loved Paige because she passed his checklist, but the simpler test was "just knowing, and you failed

that one. So, I think we should break up.” Sam then arises from his seat, says goodbye to everyone there and closes with “see you at school Paige.”

The next day, Sam shows up at Julia’s office without an appointment, carrying chocolate covered strawberries. His intent is to profess his love to Julia. Julia mentions the lack of appointment, but Sam says he “wanted to tell you something, and I wanted to do it in person because this message involves a gift.” Sam states, “Julia, I’ve wanted you to be my girlfriend since the day that I gave you my brain.” Sam then says that he later found out that Julia was in a relationship with Miles, and that there would be a conflict of interest with her as his therapist. He goes on to say that Doug suggested that Sam get a practice girlfriend, Paige, to help him prepare to be in a relationship with Julia.

Julia tries to be nice and stop Sam, but Sam continues about the things he can now do because of Julia, and that he doesn’t need her as his therapist anymore. Julia tries to explain things better for Sam, but he reveals his gift to her - chocolate covered strawberries. Julia starts to put things together about the strawberry she found at her house that she believed Miles dropped and asks if Sam broke into her house with chocolate covered strawberries. Sam said, “No, the window was open, and I just silently climbed in.” Julia, getting angry at Sam, says, “Well, you dropped one.” Julia, now visibly angry with Sam, tells him to leave. Sam tells Julia that when they danced in the parking garage “he just knew” he loves Julia, and then asks, “didn’t you?” Julia asks Sam, “Are you asking if I want to start a romantic relationship with my teenage patient?” Sam replies, “Yes, exactly.” Julia is angry and is caustic by explaining why that is not possible. Julia tells Sam she is very upset and what Sam did was inappropriate. Sam gets

very confused, and the stress of being rejected, and worse, having the person you believe you love angry at you, causes him to start repeating Antarctic penguin species.

Julia's voice fades into the background, but as she notices Sam's stress, she says she's sorry for upsetting him. Sam leaves Julia's office hurriedly and walks out of the building into the parking lot, almost being hit by a car. He gets onto the bus to go home, but as he gets more and more stressed, he starts beating his back/head against the bus window and has a seizure. The bus driver, Eduardo, recognizes Sam because of their interactions, and Eduardo calls Doug and Elsa about Sam. Eduardo and Doug speak outside the bus, while Elsa goes inside to find Sam in a ball on the bus floor. Elsa calms Sam down and the three go home.

Doug confronts Julia about upsetting Sam, saying, "He let his guard down with you, he trusted you. You know how many people that kid has in his life that actually treat him like a person, and that's what you do? You crushed him." Julia tells Doug that she is not the only person to be blamed in the scenario, that "you knew Sam had a crush on me. You enabled those feelings." The entire Sam-Julia situation would have been much different had Elsa been more aware of Sam's actions, one would believe. Doug kept most of that from Elsa to have something that he and Sam could bond over, even though the end result was bad for Sam. Doug ends up telling Elsa that he knew about Sam's crush on Julia, and that he should have told Elsa.

The entire first season's story of Sam's quest for Julia evidences sexually abnormal behavior. The missed cues with all of the girls he attempted to go out with, the missed cues with Paige, and the meltdown with Julia cause Sam's representation to be terribly naive and destructive based on his sexual inappropriate behavior. There are other

instances, but Sam's quest for Julia is the main expression of the sexually abnormal stereotype.

### *Disabled Person as a Burden*

Barnes's characterization of this stereotype, from above, is that disabled people on their own are helpless, but with the help of a supportive able-bodied person, the disabled person can be "normal" and without a typical person, a disabled person is unable to participate in life (Barnes, 1992, p. 30). *Atypical* is filled with this stereotype. Sam's relationship with Zahid has Sam asking for advice about relationships and girls, fashion, lying, among other topics. Sam and the audience are made to believe that Sam can only be a typical man by emulating and relying on Zahid, Elsa, and Doug, especially in the first season. Elsa and Doug are constantly supervising and guiding Sam through life, and often when Elsa or Doug are not able to help Sam negotiate life, he ends up in a seizure or elopes, or worse, breaks up a relationship, as with Julia and Miles. Much of this is in the first season, and the show relaxes this more as Sam becomes more nuanced and complex, and likely because the above-mentioned Dr. Deen helps guide the show in a more realistic and less stereotypical direction.

In season one, episode two, *A Human Female*, Sam is "researching" relationships. At school, Sam sees a girl, Bailey, and a boy, Arlo, kissing among some other students, although Sam saw Bailey kissing a different boy, Henry, the day prior. Sam immediately goes up to Bailey and asks her how Arlo "wooded" her away from Henry. Sam refers to Bailey as a "skank," which is how Casey described her in an earlier scene. Arlo is annoyed, and he and the other students start making fun of Sam because Sam is awkward and answers their questions inappropriately. Sam starts narrating and says, "People think

I don't know when I'm being picked on, but I do. I just don't always know why, which, in some ways, is worse." The sensory overload of the students talking and laughing causes Sam to shut down. Bailey sees Sam is troubled, and states that the students should "leave him alone, he's not all there." Sam, in obvious distress, runs away from the group.

Elsa picks up Sam from school, and the next scene shows him sitting in his bed, engaging in repetitively saying the four types of Antarctic penguins, Adélie, Chinstrap, Emperor, Gentoo, over and over. That is very stereotypical behavior for people on the autism spectrum to display in stressful times. Doug asks Elsa about Sam, and Elsa says Sam won't speak to her and he has locked himself in his room. After Doug asks if Sam is OK through the door, Sam opens the door, and says he wants to talk to "dad," which shocks both Doug and Elsa. Sam says he was doing what Doug suggested, and formulating a plan to steal Julia from Miles, although Sam does not tell Doug that Julia and Miles were the objects of his plan. Doug suggests that Sam misunderstood their last conversation. Sam related the situation at school, and how the students were making fun of him, but Sam did not know why. Sam states very emphatically to Doug, "I am all there! I am!"

In season one, episode five, *That's My Sweatshirt*, Paige and Sam are in Sam's room, and Paige comments on his room being cluttered by stating that she has been doing some research, and that some believe people on the autistic spectrum are "always neat, sometimes they're not." Paige starts picking up Sam's tchotchkes and starts to pick up Edison, his turtle. Sam tells Paige not to pick up Edison. The next scene is Sam sitting in front of his closet doors, and Doug comes in, asking Sam "what's going on?" Paige says, "Hi Mr. Gardner" from the closet. Doug asks about the disembodied voice from the

closet, and Sam says that Paige was “being annoying, so I locked her in there.” Doug makes Sam let Paige out of the closet and tells him “you don’t lock girls in your closet,” and that Sam should apologize. Sam says, “But I’m not sorry, I did what I needed to do.” Paige says that she read that people on the autism spectrum have “outsized reactions to stuff,” and that everything was fine. Paige then says, “Let’s be honest, I can be a handful, even for neurotypicals.” There are many more episodes in that vein, where Sam has endangered himself or engaged in potentially harmful actions without a typical person being there to help him navigate the situation. These primarily happen in the first season but are scattered through the series.

#### The Medical Model of Disability Versus the Social Model of Disabilities in *Atypical*

From above, the medical model of disabilities treats a disabled person or a disability as a pathology to be cured (see Dirth & Branscombe, 2017; Finkelstein, 1997; Gabel & Peters, 2004; Hahn, 1987; Oliver, 2004). The social model of disability comes from a 1976 UPIAS publication that states, “It is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (p. 14). *Atypical* shows Sam’s representation as identifying with both models, in very distinct ways throughout the series.

The very first scene of the series shows Sam in Julia Sasaki’s office, engaged in a therapy session. Julia is a psychology professor at the fictional Denton College, and her specialty is people on the autism spectrum. Sam relies on Julia heavily in the first season, and he looks forward to his weekly sessions with Julia in which she offers Sam advice about navigating life. Sam’s entire relationship with Julia is an enforcement of the

medical model of disabilities. Elsa is very rule-bound and immediately after Sam and Julia end their therapist and patient relationship, she starts shopping for other therapists to replace Julia. The entire first season of *Atypical* is very reliant on the medical model of disability being displayed. Sam needs Julia to act appropriately, and by extension, people on the autism spectrum need a trusted therapist to help them navigate the world of neurotypicals.

*Atypical* also breaks with the medical model and starts to play up the social model of disabilities in various scenes. Whenever Sam is under duress or is unable to communicate because of a sensory overload or some language barrier, the social model of disability is on display. In season one, episode two, *A Human Female*, Sam is “researching” relationships, as mentioned above. When the students start making fun of Sam while Sam starts narrating and says, “People think I don’t know when I’m being picked on, but I do. I just don’t always know why, which, in some ways, is worse.” The sensory overload of the students talking and laughing causes Sam to shut down. Bailey sees Sam is troubled, and states that the students should “leave him alone, he’s not all there” which is an enforcement of the social model of disabilities in that many people on the autism spectrum are certainly “all there.” And Sam, who ends up graduating with the 3rd highest grade point average in the school, is certainly a very intelligent character.

In season one, episode three, *Julia Says*, Sam asks Elsa to take him shopping at the mall for clothes. Elsa attempts to talk Sam out of that and relates a story about the last time they were at the mall. Elsa mentions the harsh lighting, the music, the crowds, and that Sam had an incident and slapped someone, and they were banned from the mall. Sam argues that Julia told Sam she thought he was ready. Sam insists, however, telling Elsa,

“I’m not a little kid. I can do things.” Elsa relents, and Sam has Zahid meet them at the mall, “because he’s the most stylish person I know” declares Sam. Elsa then engages with a store associate she spoke with on the telephone about making the store more friendly for people on the autism spectrum. This scene very solidly identifies with the social model of disabilities, in that the store could make some brief alterations to accommodate someone on the autism spectrum but did not. Elsa gets a bit angry with the store associate and, by example, pushes the associate on the shoulder, which results in Elsa being thrown out of the mall this time. Of course, the twist on the story from earlier is very funny, but it is inconsistent. The store is loud, harshly lit, there are lots of people and children crying in addition to the overwhelming amount of different clothes. It seems like a perfect place to send Sam into sensory overload, but rather than use a characteristic of someone on the autism spectrum, Sam is undeterred by everything. Seemingly his desire for updating his style is greater than his disability.

In season one, episode six, *The D-Train to Bonetown*, Paige tells Sam that she wants to go to the “winter formal” with him. Sam says that he could sit outside in the hallway with his noise-cancelling headphones, but Paige doesn’t like that idea. Paige attends a parent-teacher association meeting with the intention of having the school change the winter formal to a “silent” event, where the music would be played through wireless headphones. Paige explains that her boyfriend, Sam, is on the autism spectrum, and that events like the winter formal are difficult for Sam because of the sensory overload that dances present.

Paige makes that argument that although Sam is on the autism spectrum, he should still be able to participate in school activities. One of the parents at the meeting,

April, turns to Elsa, who is also at the meeting and says, “Let me guess, this is all your idea?” However, Elsa had no hand in Paige’s decision to present the idea to the parent-teacher organization. Paige says that she believes Newton High “should be a place that’s inclusive of all students.”

April also addresses the meeting and says that she is having her daughter’s hair styled at significant expense, and that the headphones will harm the hairstyle. In addition, April says that the winter formal is highly anticipated by students, and questions whether the character of the event should be changed “for one kid?” and that a silent dance is “just sad.” Elsa replies that what she believes is “sad” is that Sam is excluded from many events, because of sensory overload issues, and that expensive hairstyles are “not on my list” of events to care about. The meeting attendees vote to have the dance with wireless headphones.

As the meeting adjourns, Elsa stops April and asks why did April vote against the silent dance idea. April responds, “Because the world doesn’t revolve around you.” Interesting reply, as the world definitely does not revolve around disabled people. There is no government enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act, so any attempt at gaining access in an inaccessible building must be done by private citizens who pay out of pocket for a lawyer. The penalty is very low, so most lawyers will not take those cases on a contingency, either. Disabled people are routinely excluded from life, and this is a great example of the social model of disabilities being recognized.

The biggest nod to the social model of disabilities versus the medical model is Sam and his relationship to therapists. In season two, episode three, *Little Dude and the Lion*, Doug, Elsa, and Sam are in the office of the school guidance counsellor, Ms.

Whitaker, and the conversation moves to Sam applying for college. Elsa says that after graduation from high school, Sam will live at home and take a couple of classes at a community college. Ms. Whitaker tells Sam that she hosts a group of students that are on the autism spectrum with the goal of helping each handle transitions, such as transitioning between high school life and college. Doug is positive about the group, but Elsa is immediately negative, as Sam being independent would decrease her influence over Sam. As mentioned above, after Dr. Michelle Dean, a former employee of UCLA's Center for Autism and Research and Treatment, was hired as a consultant on the show to help with the representation of people on the autism spectrum, *Atypical's* depiction of people on the autism spectrum became more realistic and less like a college psychology textbook (Thaxton, 2017). Sam participating in a peer group for support versus Sam seeing a therapist relaxes the medical model of disability that the first season almost single-handedly enforces.

Later in the episode, Doug suggests Sam go to the peer group Ms. Whitaker mentioned, but Sam is skeptical and asks why he would want to listen to people talk about "stupid problems." Doug reminds Sam that the group participants are also in the autism spectrum. Sam ends up going to the autism spectrum peer group, which is right at the time when Elsa set up a meeting for Sam with another therapist. In a big step for positive and appropriate representation, all of the actors that play the characters in the peer support group are people in Sam's peer group are actors on the autism spectrum, which is a very positive move for *Atypical* (Patton, 2018). The motto of the autism spectrum community is "nothing about us, without us" (Rowe, 2017).

Sam ends up identifying with the students in the peer group. Sam ends up telling the peer group about all of the changes he is undergoing and that he felt like a “pack animal with no pack” and that he is scared. Ms. Whitaker suggests that when Sam feels scared, he should ask for help, and assigns each student to ask for help in the next week. Sam tells Doug and Elsa that he thought the peer group was not a good idea, but that he enjoyed seeing people that are “just as strange as me.” Sam then tells Doug and Elsa he wants to go to college after graduation. This really shows Sam becoming more independent and *Atypical* firmly rejecting the medical model of disabilities. Sam says that college might be difficult, because of the changes involved, but that if he needs help “I’ll ask for it,” an idea he just got from the peer group. Elsa expresses her support for Sam’s newfound independence and decision.

#### Positive Representations in *Atypical*

While there are plenty of negative representations of disabilities in *Atypical*, there are positive representations, as well. As early as season one, episode five, *That’s My Sweatshirt*, Paige seeks out Casey at school, and asks for advice about Sam. Casey says, “Yep, stop seeing my brother.” Casey then accuses Paige of seeking “extra credit for dating the weird kid.” Paige states that Casey’s accusations are not right, that she “really likes Sam.” Casey asks Paige, “What happens when he starts to rely on you, and you leave? That shit can really mess him up.” Casey says Paige is making everything worse.

Based on Paige’s conversation with Casey, Paige ends her relationship with Sam. In a therapy session with Julia, she asks Sam about Paige, and Sam relates that he and Paige are no longer in a romantic relationship. Sam tells Julia that, “Most people I meet don’t even try to get me. Paige tried, and that was nice.” Sam says he only focused on

Paige being annoying and didn't consider the "good parts." At home, Sam tells Casey that Paige broke up with him because of what Casey said to her at school, and angrily says, "You drove her away." Casey says that all Sam did was complain about Paige. Sam tells Casey, "Well, I like her I think . . . I don't need you messing with my life." That interaction is a positive representation for disability, in that it shows something other than a stereotype. Sam is just a typical person angry because his sister ended his relationship.

Later in the episode, Sam interrupts Paige's French class, shocking the teacher, the students, and Paige. Sam tells Paige that he hated it when she touched his tchotchkes and stole his hoodie, but that he "hated it even more when you were gone." Sam then gives Paige a penguin necklace to wear instead of his hoodie. Paige gets up and she and Sam kiss in front of a poster of the Eiffel Tower, a reference to Paige mentioning that she and Sam could go to France and kiss in front of the actual Eiffel Tower earlier. This is the first really positive representation in the series, in that Sam is not the butt of a joke or engaging in any overtly stereotypical behavior, other than being a young man that makes a scene to romance a young woman.

In season two, episode four, *Pants on Fire*, Sam narrates that there is one person who always treats him "normal and tells me the truth," which is Zahid. Sam relates a theory that Zahid has about people on the autistic spectrum are "the normal ones, because we see the world as it really is." The line is from his college entrance essay that Ms. Whitaker starts reading in the guidance counsellor's office. Ms. Whitaker continues reading that Sam doesn't see a friendship between someone on the autistic spectrum and a typical person, but Sam just sees "two friends. And for me, that is an accomplishment." Ms. Whitaker tells Sam his essay is "real good."

In season two, episode five, *The Egg is Pipping*, in Sam's peer group, Ms. Whitaker is giving the students statistics about employment among people on the autism spectrum and asks who in the group has a job. Sam raises his hand, and another group member asks Sam, "What do you do with your money?" Sam mentions that when he is paid, he gives his paycheck to Elsa. One of the other peers says Sam's lack of a bank account makes him seem childish. So, Sam's new focus is his own bank account.

Sam tells Elsa he wants a bank account, to become responsible with money. Elsa refers to herself as "the bank of Elsa" and that Sam's money is there. Elsa is negative about Sam's intention because of the responsibility and the added stress of managing the bank account. Doug says that Sam should have a bank account and decides he will take Sam to open a bank account. In the bank associate's office, as Sam and the associate are wrapping up opening Sam's bank account, the associate tells Sam if he has any questions, and asks if "it always smells like nothing in here?," if the volume of the ATM machines could be regulated by users, ending with how many "lollypops am I allowed to take?" The bank associate tells Sam he can have as many as he wants, to which Sam replies, "This is wayyy better than the bank of Elsa." While the scene does end by laughing at Sam, he did make a pretty funny observation. This is how a lot of the jokes involving Sam evolve after the first season. Rather than Sam or his disability being the punchline of the joke, Sam is in on the joke, or Sam is making the joke. There is still a bit of the "Who's on First" routine scattered about in the episodes, but more often than not, innate characteristics are not the butt of the jokes.

In season two, episode eight, *Living at an Angle*, Sam tells Ms. Whitaker about being anxious about college, and she reminds him it is "normal to be nervous around

transitions.” Sam admits that the move away from home is “scary.” Ms. Whitaker suggests that Sam does not have to move to go to college, because there are other colleges in the area. Ms. Whitaker tells Sam that Denton University, where Julia’s office is, has a scientific illustration program. While a positive representation of disabilities, here is a moment when *Atypical* goes into happy ending “Hollywood” mode. Not everything has to be a neat and tidy ending. Sam is, of course, great at science and art.

In season three, episode three, *Cocaine Pills and Pony Meat*, Sam has started college at Denton University, and is expressing frustration about college. Sam decides that he will not seek any assistance from the Office of Disability Accommodations (ODA), that he will be fine without assistance. However, Sam narrates that “no expedition goes exactly as scheduled,” just as he enters the ODA office to apply for services. Rudolph, the director of the ODA, has multiple sclerosis, and is played by a disabled actor, Scott Rosendall (Scott Rosendall, n.d.). Rudolph introduces Sam to one of the ODA staff, Sidney, who is played by Tal Anderson, an actor on the autistic spectrum (Fabian, n.d.). Jasper, who is one of Sam’s high school peer group members, is also signed up with the ODA at Denton. Sam, Sidney, and Jasper are talking, and Sam is amazed at the services they offer. Jasper tells Sam that even if Sam doesn’t sign up for any services, “you can still use the bean bags.” It seems that Rashid took the early criticism of not using disabled actors to heart, as *Atypical* uses a lot of disabled actors. The representations in this episode are good.

The biggest positive is that *Atypical* was recently renewed for a fourth, and what Robia Rashid says will be the final season. Regarding the series on the whole, if the first season is the only consideration, the series is not a positive representation of disabilities.

That the entire season is a litany of one stereotype after another, and as mentioned reads like a college psychology textbook chapter regarding someone on the autism spectrum. The kitchen sink approach to Sam, the enforcement of the medical model of disabilities, and the overt reliance on a disability as the object of ridicule, among the other stereotypes mentioned, make season one uncomfortable to watch, more often than not. The first season of *Atypical*, while very entertaining, is a poor representation of disabilities.

As was mentioned above, there is no clear timeline to discern when Dr. Deen was brought in to consult for the show, but starting with the second season, the representations of people on the autism spectrum became more nuanced and relied less on stereotypes to represent people on the autistic spectrum. In addition, the medical model of disabilities is almost fully rejected by Sam and the other characters on the show, with the social model of disabilities taking the lead. Sam begins relying on peers, which are played by actors on the autism spectrum, versus a therapist, Sam is often telling the joke rather than being the punchline of the joke, and while there are surely some problems with the representation at times, the bulk of seasons two and three are mostly positive representations of disability. After the missteps of the first season, the writing and acting are so good that there is the temptation to give *Atypical* a pass on the representation. *Atypical* does not deliver the “Cosby Moment.” The end result is a net positive for entertainment, but Sam’s representation of disabilities is mixed, at best.

## CHAPTER V – BREAKING STEREOTYPES: READING *BREAKING BAD*

### Introduction

Although not a pay channel such as HBO, the basic cable nature of A&E allows for more mature subject matter in *Breaking Bad*. *Breaking Bad* adhered to a weekly schedule, so that does make it similar to *Speechless*, as a viewer had to seek the series out or a viewer might stumble upon the program while channel surfing. *Breaking Bad* is similar to *Atypical* in that both series included more mature subject matter. The biggest difference *Breaking Bad* has to either of the aforementioned series is that the lead character is not disabled. However, there are three major characters that are disabled representations to analyze. This chapter will be broken into four sections, beginning with a reading of season one, episode one, *Pilot*, and then each disabled character has a section with a short biography and how the character either enforces or breaks from a stereotypical disability representation. The ways the character supports the medical model of disabilities or the social model of disabilities will be addressed in that character's section, with a section of positive representations and a general analysis of the character's representation at the end of the sections.

#### *Season One, Episode One, Pilot*

*Breaking Bad* chronicles the White family: Walter, Skyler and Walter Jr. (Walt Jr.). Walter White is a public high school chemistry teacher that was involved in a significant venture as a younger man that did not work out in his favor.

From the first shot of season one, episode one, *Pilot*, it is clear that this is not a typical series. A pair of khaki trousers, once airborne, lands on a dirt road, immediately run over by a large recreational vehicle (RV). Walter White is driving the RV, wearing a

gas mask, and a pair of underwear. There is a person passed out in the passenger seat, and other people are also seemingly passed out on the floor, with some sort of liquid and glass on the floor of the RV. White's driving lands the RV off of the road, stuck in a crevasse. White, nervous, exits the RV as sirens from some type of emergency vehicles sound in the background. White makes a confession video with a camera addressed to his family: Skyler and Walt Jr.

The shot shifts to the White's home, three weeks into the past. Walter awakes early, and half-exercises on an approximation of a stair machine. Walter notices an award on his wall, recognizing his contribution to a Nobel prize. That scene juxtaposes Walter's huge scientific achievement with his lacking financial situation. At breakfast, it is Walter White's fiftieth birthday, as evidenced by the number fifty displayed on his breakfast eggs with "veggie bacon" and Skyler White wishing Walter "happy birthday." Skyler suggests that Walter has a second job, and she wants Walter home at a reasonable hour after his work there.

Enter Walt Jr. on Lofstrand arm crutches, with a "hey." Walt Jr. appears at breakfast a lot in the series, so much so that the fan wiki mention that as a Walt Jr. characteristic (Walter White Jr.). Walt Jr. asks Walter, "So, how's it feels to be old?" Walter replies, "How does it feel to be a smart ass?" Walt Jr. replies, "Good." This, and most of Walter and Walt Jr.'s interactions are mostly free of stereotypes.

Walter White is a high school chemistry teacher, and Walt Jr. attends the same school. Walter pulls into an accessible parking space at the school and tells Walt Jr. "see ya at home." Walter does not pander or attempt to assist Walt Jr. out of his car, which is a positive representation, and certainly a high school student that has lived with cerebral

palsy for life would not need or want help getting out of a car. Walter is a good teacher in that he is passionate about the subject. Walter lectures on how chemistry traces the evolution of life, which foreshadows the series. On the drive home from Walter's second job at a car wash, he notices the handicapped parking pass hanging on his rear-view mirror. He grabs it and attempts to close the hang tag in the glove compartment, but the glove compartment will not close.

Walter arrives home and Skyler has arranged a "surprise party" for him. It is revealed that Skyler is pregnant with a second White child. At the party, it becomes apparent that Walt Jr. respects his uncle, Hank Schrader, and is enamored with Hank's tales of glory and his boisterous, alpha-male demeanor. Hank jokingly mentions that Walter has a "brain the size of Wisconsin, but we won't hold that against you!" Hank is married to Skyler White's sister, Marie. Hank is a Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) officer, and seemingly exaggerates his position, a bit. During the party, Hank turns the television on to show the news that he captured a drug dealer. There is about seven-hundred thousand dollars at the scene of the arrest. Hank suggests that Walter ride along with him one night to see what Hank's job is like.

Later in the episode, Walter collapses at his part-time job at the car wash. On the ambulance ride to the hospital, Walter tries to get the emergency medical tech (EMT) to "drop me off at a corner" and reveals that he doesn't have good insurance. After noticing a cough and stressed breathing in the ambulance, the EMT has Walter take a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan at the hospital. The MRI evidences inoperable lung cancer.

At the White's home later, Skyler is talking with an apparent bill collector about a payment. Apparently, a public high school teacher's salary doesn't really make the ends of the month meet. Walter doesn't tell Skyler about the collapse or the cancer diagnosis. The next day, Walter angrily quits his job at the car wash. Later, at home, Walter calls Hank and asks about the offer to ride along.

Presumably the following afternoon, Walter is in a ride-along with Hank and his partner, Steve Gomez. They bust a methamphetamine (meth) manufacturing lab and arrest the home chemist, Emilio, because the DEA has a tip. Walter asks to take a look at the "lab," but notices a former student, Jesse Pinkman, escaping from the house next door to the site of the lab. Walter discovers where Jesse lives and goes to Jesse's house. After the initial greeting, Walter suggests to Jesse that Walter's chemistry knowledge and Jesse's street knowledge of selling meth could be lucrative. Walter goes to his school and steals the requisite glassware for manufacturing meth. Jesse suggests a recreational vehicle (RV) that would be a suitable portable meth laboratory. Walter has hatched a plan to manufacture and sell meth, so he can leave a nest egg for the White family after his death.

In the next scene, Walt Jr. goes shopping for jeans with Walter and Skyler. Walt Jr. is struggling with putting the jeans on in the dressing room, and Walter comes into the dressing room to help Walt Jr. This is the disabled person as a burden stereotype making an appearance (Barnes 1992, p. 30). The scene switches to Walt Jr. in the store, checking out the jeans in a mirror. There is a group of a few typical people in the store, and they are making fun of Walt Jr., which enforces the society model of disabilities. Walter glares at the trio making fun of Walt Jr., and Walter is concocting a reaction up in his mind.

Walter leaves the store, and Skyler suggests to Walt Jr. to ignore the people that are laughing at him.

Walter enters the store from the other entrance and knocks the person that was vocally harassing Walt Jr. the ground, grinding his foot into the person's calf muscle. Walter lets the person up, and the other person is larger in stature than Walter. The typically mild-mannered Walter, to the horror of Skyler, but to the delight of Walt Jr., attempts to provoke the much younger person into a fight. That scene is where Walter "breaks bad" and is a plot point for the entire series. This is solidly in the social model of disability, as Walt Jr. was being mocked and ostracized because of his disability.

Later, in the Navaho Nation reservation, Walter and Jesse are going to manufacture meth in the RV Jesse purchased. Walter disrobes, except for his underwear: white cotton briefs, known as "tighty whiteys." Jesse brings out a video camera to capture the scene, which Walter immediately ends. Walter manufactures very pure meth, and Jesse is impressed. Jesse wants to ingest the meth Walter manufactured, but Walter says not to ingest what they have made. Jesse is hesitant but agrees and sets up a meeting with a drug dealer, Crazy Eight, to distribute the meth.

In the next scene, Crazy Eight drives up where Walter and Jesse are set up to manufacture meth with his cousin, Emilio, who was the person arrested on Walter's ride-along. Crazy Eight and Emilio are there to kill Walter and Jesse, but Walter says he will teach them how to create pure meth, such that Walter manufactures. Jesse is unconscious on the desert ground. In the mobile lab, Walter tricks Crazy Eight and Emilio, and sets up a chemical reaction to poison them in the "lab." Walter frantically gets Jesse into the RV and drives away – this is the initial scene in context.

Walter eventually discloses his cancer diagnosis to his family and tries to hide his life as a drug manufacturer. Often, his outward expression about his criminal life is that he is trying to provide for his family, but that falls at the end of the series. Walter is engaged in a criminal enterprise because he enjoys the atmosphere and the game aspect, at the essence of the character. What seems like a typical procedural detective show on the surface belies some of the underlying issues, but this is not that analysis. This analysis of the first episode of the series is to provide a sketch of the major characters and to set-up how those character's identification might change over the series.

### Walter Junior

Walt Jr. is Skyler and Walter White's first child. Walt Jr. has cerebral palsy and is played by actor R.J. Mitte, who also has cerebral palsy. Mitte's cerebral palsy is not as severe as the disability he plays Walt Jr. (Walter White Jr.). Walt Jr. is a typical high school student, who is often with his friend Louis Corbett. Walt Jr. has a slight speech impediment and walks with the assistance of Lofstrand arm crutches.

#### *Walter Junior and Disability Stereotypes*

In season one, episode five, *Gray Matter*, at the end of a silent and tense breakfast, Walt Jr. stands up from the table, and Walter asks him if he is ready to go to school. Walt Jr. replies that he's "taking the bus." Walt Jr. is upset about Walter's cancer diagnosis, and Walt Jr. thinks Walter is being weak for not wanting to try to fight the cancer diagnosis with treatment. Walt Jr. is distancing himself from Walter.

Later, Walt Jr. and some friends are shown outside a gas station, trying to get someone to purchase beer for them. One of the acquaintances suggests that Walt Jr. should ask someone to purchase the beer, and Walt Jr. asks why he should be the one to

do the asking. One of the friends says, “Give me the crutches and I’ll ask.” Without more context, the assumption would be that the crutches would make him appear pitiful or worthy of charity. Walter Jr. does ask someone to purchase beer for them, and the person is an off-duty policeman. The policeman makes Walt Jr. call his dad, but instead of calling Walter, he calls Hank. Hank tells Walt Jr. that it is “not cool” that he called Hank instead of Walter to pick him up from the police station. At home, Skyler expresses anger at Walt Jr. for his actions, and Walt Jr. goes to his room. Hank suggests Skyler not tell Walter about Walt Jr.’s actions. Hank suggests Walt Jr. is acting out because of Walter’s cancer diagnosis.

Later in the episode, the Whites and the Schraders are at the White’s house, and they are staging an intervention of sorts to convince Walter to undergo cancer treatment. When Walt Jr. speaks, he says the entire exercise is “bullshit.” Walt Jr. is angry at Walter and calls him a “pussy.” Walt Jr. is mad that Walter is giving up on life, and asks him, “What if you gave up on me?” Walt Jr. continues by picking up one of his Lofstrand arm crutches and reminds Walter that being a teenager with cerebral palsy is hard and berates Walter for being “scared of a little chemotherapy.”

The first scene in this episode is free from any stereotypes, and just evidences a typical boy that is dealing with his father’s cancer diagnosis. The scene with Walt Jr. at the convenience store is stereotypical on one hand, but also typical. Walt Jr. is certainly acting out by trying to have someone purchase beer for him and the friends, but that is not a stereotype of a disability representation but is more of the action a typical teenager might attempt. The stereotype comes in the disability as pitiful form, when the unnamed friend seems to be suggesting that the key for the trio being successful in their quest for

beer would be to illicit pity for someone disabled that used arm crutches to walk. The scene with Walter's "intervention" of sorts is a reverse on the disabled person as their own worst enemy trope, which, as Barnes (1992) states, is where a disabled person could rise above and meet a challenge with strength rather than self-pity with help from the well-meaning able-bodied friend (p. 29). In the above scenario, instead of the typical character giving the get-tough speech to the lowly disabled character, Walt Jr. delivers the message, with his very pointed question to Walter, "What if you gave up on me?"

In season two, episode four, *Down*, Walter and Walt Jr. are alone in the house. Walt Jr. tells Walter good morning, and asks about Skyler, who has gone. Walt Jr. asks, "Where's breakfast?" Walter suggests the two of them go do "something fun." The "something fun" is Walter teaching Walt Jr. how to drive in an abandoned parking lot. Walter is complimentary of Walt Jr.'s driving, and Walt Jr. tells Walter that "Louis has been helping me." Walt Jr. is driving with his right foot on the gas pedal, and the left foot on the brake, because "it's way easier." Walter stops Walt Jr. from that and tries to get Walt Jr. to only use his right foot for the gas and the brake. Walt Jr. is jerking the car and says, "I can't do this. My legs don't work that way." Walter tells Walt Jr. not to "set limits" for himself. Walt Jr. takes off again, and in a moment of frustration, gets confused about the gas and brake, eventually stopping just as the car hits a traffic barrel. It is interesting that Walt Jr. would not be learning to drive a car without hand controls, as certainly it would seem he would have to have accessible hand controls to drive as a restriction on his license. Also, Walter's cheerleading about Walt Jr. setting limits seems a bit misplaced.

During the driving lesson, there seems to be two stereotypes playing out. When Walt Jr. initially is driving, he is using both feet, which is not typically how people drive a car. This is making Walt Jr. a burden, because if he cannot drive a car, he will always rely on someone to drive him where he needs to be. Walter admonishes Walt Jr. for saying, “I can’t do this” regarding Walter telling him to use his right foot for the gas and the brake. When Walter tells Walt Jr. not to “set limits for himself,” the disabled person as their own worst enemy stereotype comes into focus. Walter is playing the able-bodied person that gives a get-tough speech to a disabled person. Walt Jr.’s statement that “my legs don’t work that way” is self-pity over not having “typical” use of his legs, and Walter’s admonition about setting limits is there to give poor disabled Walt Jr. courage to succeed.

The other stereotype that Walt Jr.’s character enforces is the disabled character as a curio. As mentioned above, Barnes (1992) sees a disabled character as atmosphere or curio is when a disabled representation is used to add impact to a scene, reducing disabled people to oddities (p. 24). However, Walt Jr.’s disability has no bearing on the series. This is analogous to Herman Gray’s (1995) statement about *The Huxtables* and *The Cosby Show*, in that their representation is powerful because the Huxtables are a typical upper-middle-class family “that happens to be black” (Dates, 1990; Dyson, 1989; Fuller, 1992; Gray, 1989; Greenly, 1987; Jhally and Lewis, 1992; as cited by Gray, p. 80). Walter White, Jr. is a typical high school teenager that happens to be disabled. It is possible that Walt Jr. is represented as disabled to give Walter some justification for breaking the law, but there is no indication of that in the series.

*Walter Junior and the Medical Model of Disabilities Versus the Social Model of Disabilities*

There are no scenes where Walt Jr. enforces the medical model of disabilities. There are few scenes involving Walt Jr. that touch on any disability models at all. One of the notable scenes that enforce the society model of disabilities comes in season one, episode one, *Pilot*, when Walt Jr. is harassed by the people at the clothing store buying jeans. That almost fits the disabled person as a crime victim stereotype. But this certainly fits the social model of disabilities in that the people harassing Walt Jr. would certainly not seem to go out of their way to accommodate for Walt Jr. in anyway. In addition, by showing a scene where a disabled person is being harassed by typical people, it shows that disabled people are not wanted in the typical world, and just being present at a place puts a disabled person at risk of being harassed.

The other time when Walt Jr. enforces the social model of disabilities comes in an interaction with Hank. In season three, episode twelve, *Half Measures*, Walt Jr., Marie, and Hank are playing cards in Hank's hospital room. Hank was shot and has incurred a spinal injury as the result of a shoot-out. Walt Jr. and Hank are making small talk, and Marie tells Walt Jr. that the doctor said that Hank could leave anytime "he wants to." Hank asserts that he won't be leaving unless he walks out of the hospital. That is a complete enforcement of the medical model by Hank, as the only way to move must be walking, and the only way to walk is through physical therapy. Walt Jr. rhetorically asks Hank if "people in wheelchairs should be in hospitals?" Walt Jr. then asks, "What about people on crutches? Maybe I should be in here, too." This is an example of someone that is fully enforcing the medical model of disabilities, Hank in this case, coming face to face

with the social model of disabilities, represented by Walt Jr. In Walt Jr.'s situation, he would not be able to walk without the Lofstrand arm crutches, while Hank's insistence on walking won't even allow him to use a wheelchair for mobility.

*Positive Representations of Disability by Walter Junior*

One could argue that the whole of Walt Jr.'s character is a positive representation of disability, in that Walt Jr. is just a teenage boy that happens to have cerebral palsy. There are a few notable scenes that exemplify the positive representation of disabilities by Walt Jr.

Walt Jr. is at breakfast, predictably, with Walter and Skyler in season one, episode two, *The Cat's in the Bag*. Walter is relating a story about senior girls presenting photos for the yearbook with excessive cleavage because of a special bra. Walt Jr. laughs and says "the Wonderbra." This is a positive representation of disability in that while Walt Jr. is disabled, he is aware of fashion trends, and certainly knows about something young girls might wear to enhance a bustline. Similarly, Season one, episode seven, *A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal*, Walt Jr. is capturing video footage at Skyler's baby shower. A typical interaction with the family and party guests. As Walt Jr. is capturing video, in a very typical moment, he captures a woman showing a lot of cleavage standing to his side.

In season one, episode four, *Cancer Man*, Walt Jr. confronts Walter about his behavior. Walter has been diagnosed with cancer and has started manufacturing methamphetamine (meth) to provide for a pregnant Skyler and Walt Jr. Walter is trying to hide his secret life and is not doing a very good job. Skyler and Walter are talking about treatment options for Walter's cancer. The out of pocket expense is significant, and Walter suggests that he wouldn't want to leave Skyler with a large amount of debt in the

event the treatment was not successful, and Walter succumbed to cancer. Walt Jr. overhears Walter and Skyler talking, and yells, “then why don’t you just fucking die, already!” A teenage boy would be angry and scared at the thought of a parent dying, and probably angrier if the parent didn’t try to fight a disease to remain alive to be with the family. A perfectly normal interaction a teenage child might have with a parent in the same situation.

In season two, episode ten, *Over*, Skyler organized a gathering of people to celebrate Walter’s cancer being in remission. Walter, Walt Jr., and Hank are sitting around a table. Walter pours himself and Hank a shot of tequila, and pours Walt Jr. a shot, too. Walt Jr. starts coughing after drinking the shot, and Hank laughs, while patting him on the back. Walter pours another round for all three, and Hank reminds Walter that Walt Jr. is only sixteen. Walt Jr. is looking at Hank, and Walter asks Walt Jr., “What are you looking at him for?” Walt Jr. and Walter drink their shots, without Hank. Walter starts to pour Walt Jr. another shot, but Hank puts his hand over Walt Jr.’s cup, but Walter continues, and pours tequila on Hank’s hand. The atmosphere is tense, and Hank suggests Walt Jr. not drink the shot Walter poured him, as Hank gets up and takes away the tequila. Walter yells after Hank, “Hey! Bring the bottle back.” That makes Walter very angry, and he gets up and angrily confronts Hank. Hank tries to diffuse the situation, but Walter insists on the tequila. Walt Jr. then falls out of his chair and starts to vomit. Walter sits back down and drinks the shot he poured. This seems like a very typical teenage boy reaction, and the scene does not have any dependence on Walt Jr.’s disability. Later, Walter apologizes about being intoxicated and making a scene at the celebration. Walt Jr. says, “But I kept up, right?” Walt Jr. is seemingly proud of drinking

too much and throwing up in the pool. Seems like a very typical father and son reaction, disability or not.

In season four, episode ten, *Salud*, Walter has moved out of the White's home and is living in a condominium because Skyler wants to insulate the rest of the family from Walter's life and interactions. Walt Jr. is upset and goes to Walter's condominium. Walter and Jesse Pinkman, his meth manufacturing partner, had a fistfight in the previous episode, so Walter is bloody and bruised. Walter tells Walt Jr. that he got into a fight because of his gambling addiction. Walter, crying, says he "made a mistake." Walt Jr. tries to comfort Walter and helps Walter to bed. In Walter's groggy state, he mistakenly calls Walt Jr. "Jesse." Walt Jr. spends the night at Walter's condominium, and Walter tells him that he doesn't want him to remember Walter in the state he was in last night. Walter tells Walt Jr. a story about seeing his father dying of Huntington's disease as a young child. Walter said he was scared of Walt Jr. remembering Walter as hollow and empty. Walt Jr. says that last night as a memory would be good, because at least Walter was "real." Perfectly typical interaction between Walter and Walt Jr.

In season five, episode fourteen, *Ozymandias*, Walt Jr. is manning the cash register at the car wash. Marie enters the car wash and hugs Walt Jr. Marie wants to talk in private with Skyler and says that "son looks like he can hold down the fort." Marie tells Skyler that Walter has been arrested by Hank. Marie is under the assumption that Hank has arrested Walter based on Hank's information to Marie earlier in the day, however, the reality is that Hank and Steve Gomez were killed in a shoot-out in the desert. After Marie leaves, Skyler talks to Walt Jr. in the car wash office, and tearily tells Walt Jr. the truth about Walter. Walt Jr. is breathing heavy and he tells Skyler, "You're

completely out of your mind.” Walt Jr. is furious that he wasn’t told the truth much sooner. Walt Jr. accuses Skyler of being “a liar.” Walt Jr. declares the story “bullshit” and says he wants to speak with Walter. Walt Jr. is angry and storms out of the office.

Later in the episode, Skyler, Holly, Skyler and Walter White’s baby girl, and Walt Jr. arrive at home, as Walter is hurriedly packing bags to get them out of town. Walt Jr. peppers Walter with questions, but in the heat of the moment, Walter waives them off. Skyler is confused, because Marie told her that Walter was in custody and repeatedly asks, “Where is Hank?” Skyler accuses Walter of killing Hank. Walt Jr. asks, “You killed Hank!?” Walt Jr. is demanding Walter talk to him. Skyler grabs a kitchen knife and demands that Walter “get out.” Walter tries talking to Skyler, and moves closer to her, but Skyler slashes Walter on the hand with the knife. Walter and Skyler tangle on the floor over possession of the knife as Walt Jr. demands they stop. Walter gets the upper hand in the fight, and Walt Jr. pulls Walter off of Skyler and jumps in the way of Walter trying to get at Skyler. Walt Jr. gets his cellular phone and calls the police, which makes Walter grab Holly and run out of the house. The scene starts with Walt Jr. working in the White’s car wash, which is a positive representation, just a normal teenager with a part-time Saturday job. The rest of the scenes mentioned are far from typical, and Walt Jr. predictably reacts with shock and anger. At the White home, Walt Jr. pulling Walter from Skyler would also be a seemingly typical reaction.

In season five, episode fifteen, *Granite State*, Walt Jr. is taking a test in class, but is called to the office over the school intercom, for a call from Marie. Walter is the one that made the call, however. Walt Jr. is shocked, angry, and awash with emotions. Walter tries to rationalize his actions to Walt Jr. by saying that he was just looking out for his

family. Walter tells Walt Jr. that he is sending money to Walt Jr.'s friend, Louis Corbett, for Walt Jr., Holly, and Skyler to use. Walt Jr. angrily accuses Walter of killing Hank. Walter Jr. eventually asks Walter, "Why are you still alive? Why won't you just die already? Just die!"

After Walter's nature is revealed to Walt Jr., it would be very typical for Walt Jr. to be angry and confused. After the confrontation where Skyler and Walter fight at home, certainly Walt Jr. would be less than happy to hear from Walter.

Walt Jr. is a positive representation of disability in *Breaking Bad*. There are very few instances when a disability stereotype is used to govern the relationship with Walt Jr. and the world around him. Walt Jr.'s characterization of the social model of disability is also a very positive and forward approach for a disabled character. Walt Jr. is a high school aged boy, going through the same things many high school boys encounter: peer pressure to drink underage, learning to drive, awkward or strained relationships with parents occasionally, among other characteristics.

#### Hank and Marie Schrader

Hank Schrader is married to Marie, Skyler White's sister. Hank is an up and coming DEA agent, is full of bravado, and is a success at his job. Marie is an x-ray technician. Hank takes Walter on a drug bust in the first episode, *Pilot*, where Walter sees Jesse Pinkman, a former student, and Walter gets the idea to manufacture meth.

In season three, episode seven, *One Minute*, Hank assaults Jesse Pinkman. In season three, episode eight, *I See You*, Hank is suspended from the DEA over the Pinkman incident, and he is forced to turn in his gun because of the suspension. After Hank is suspended from the DEA, he stops by a shopping center to buy gifts for Marie.

As Hank is leaving the shopping center, he receives a telephone call. An electronically altered voice tells Hank that two men, Lionel and Marco Salamanca (The Cousins), are coming to kill him, and he has one minute to leave the parking lot. Hank believes the call to be a prank but looks at the clock in his car and looks around nervously. Hank calls Gomez, but Gomez does not answer his phone. Hank leaves a message, suggesting that Gomez made the threatening call, but he also wants Gomez to call him. Hank is anxiously looking around, and goes for his pistol, forgetting he was relieved of that at the DEA office earlier.

Hank looks up, and sees The Cousins walking toward his car. One of The Cousins shoots the rear window out of Hank's car's and shoots Hank in the arm. Hank backs his car into the cousin, gravely wounding him. The other cousin shoots out Hank's driver's side window. Hank is shot a couple of times in the stomach area by a cousin in the ensuing shoot-out, but eventually kills the cousin with a shot to the head. This incident causes Hank to lose the ability walk, presumably with a spinal cord injury. Hank's disability representation is stereotypical in a few places, but the most significant negative characteristic about Hank is how much he and Marie enforce the medical model of disabilities. Hank is shown disabled only temporarily, so he fits Longmore's (1987) reoccurring theme, that the star often incurs a disabling injury or condition, but generally only temporarily (p. 65).

#### *Hank Schrader and the Problems with Hank's Disability Representation*

Before Hank is disabled, in season one, episode three, *And the Bag's in the River*, Hank's wife, Skyler's sister Marie infers from a phone conversation that Walt Jr. is smoking marijuana. Hank suggests that Walter or Skyler intervene, but Marie suggests

that Hank could take Walt Jr. along for a ride and scare him straight, which Hank does. Hank takes Walt Jr. to a seedy motel and calls over a supposed prostitute. The woman asks Walt Jr. if he is disabled, and Hank replies “he broke his leg playin’ football.” This shows Hank being embarrassed about Walt Jr. being disabled or that Hank is ignoring that Walt Jr. has a legitimate disability. The event plays into what Barnes (1992) refers to as a stereotype of omission, disabled people aren’t able to participate in life since there are so few disabled characters represented (Cumberbatch and Negrene, 1992, p. 136 as cited by Barnes, 1992, p. 34).

In season three episode nine, *Kafkaesque*, Hank is in the hospital recovering after surgery from the shooting incident. Hank is despondent over the spinal injury. Marie says she will seek press coverage if Hank doesn’t get the PT and health care “a hero” like Hank deserves. Marie declares, “He is not going to be in a wheelchair at forty-three.” Not Marie so much, but Hank approaches being disabled as a death sentence. For Hank, a disability is repugnant, and he can’t fathom living life disabled, especially if he can no longer walk. Hank feels useless and doesn’t want people to see him as disabled. Both Marie and Hank represent the disabled person as a burden stereotype mentioned by Barnes (1992 p. 30).

In season four, episode one, *Box Cutter*, Marie is sitting in her car in front of the Schrader house. Marie appears to dread going inside the house. As Marie enters the house, Hank is engaged in his new hobby, collecting minerals. Hank looks depressed and has not shaved in a few days as he bids on minerals on an Internet website. Marie walks into the bedroom and asks Hank about his PT session, which she hears “was very good.” Hank grunts in acknowledgement. Marie continues that the therapist told her that Hank

“broke new ground.” Hank is sullen with his arms folded across his chest, and he repeats “broke new ground.” Marie asks Hank to tell her, and Hank says, “I walked sixteen feet in twenty minutes.” Hank then goes on to sarcastically compare that to yesterday’s session. Hank says, “I need the thing” which is his request for a bedpan, as he answers Marie’s inquiry of “numero uno?” with “dos.” Marie helps Hank roll over and she places the bedpan under him.

A lot of that scene is not realistic. The bathroom in the house would have been modified for access with a wheelchair. Hank would have been taught how to roll over and how to transfer into and out of his wheelchair as first skills from a physical therapist. Hank is sullen and defeated. What is being constructed with Hank is the “own worst enemy” stereotype moment that Barnes mentions (1992, p. 29), with an able-bodied person delivering a “get tough” speech. Hank is resisting PT and any bit of a return to a typical life because he is no longer able-bodied. This does fit Hank’s character, as he denies that Walt Jr. is disabled earlier, and talks about being disabled like it is a death sentence.

In season four, episode two, *Thirty-Eight Snub*, Hank is shown examining his mineral purchases late at night with a lamp. Marie is in bed beside him, and she asks Hank if he is “OK.” Marie mentions it is very late. Hank is sarcastic and biting toward Marie’s inquiry, and states, “The last I counted, there are four bedrooms in this house, if I’m keeping you awake and all.” Marie, resigned to the fact that Hank isn’t making life easier for her, attempts to go back to sleep.

Later in the episode, Hank is shown in PT, wearing white, Velcro closure athletic shoes, and walking with a walker. The therapist, Chuck, excitedly says, “Way to go

Hank, way to soldier up!” Hank is struggling and is sweating. Chuck is doing his best to be a cheerleader for Hank, and Marie yells, “Look at you, way to go honey!” Hank walks into the bedroom and sits. Hank says excitedly, “Hells yeah!” as he gives Chuck a high five. Marie cheers and gets a high five from Chuck, but Hank does not excitedly give Marie a high five when she offers her hand. As Marie walks Chuck out, he remarks “great session, lots of positive energy.” Marie agrees with Chuck and tells him “it’s so great to see that.” Marie tells Chuck that he has “a way with him (Hank).” Marie walks into the bedroom and tells Hank that he was “so strong today.” Marie tries to make other conversation, but Hank tells her “get out.”

The writers are still setting up Hank’s “own worst enemy” moment, by Hank behaving miserably toward Marie. Hank’s “walking” is unrealistic for a couple of reasons, the first of all being that Hank is not wearing any ankle-foot orthosis, typically called a leg brace. No therapist would allow a paraplegic to attempt to walk with a walker without any foot orthosis to stabilize a patient’s foot while walking. Hank is shown walking on twisted ankles, which would typically cause someone to tumble and fall. Hank and Marie are heavily enforcing the medical model of disability. Surely Hank would be grieving the loss of his ability to walk, and his grief and anger would probably cause him to be moody and coarse, occasionally.

In season four, episode seven, *Problem Dog*, Marie is at the car wash, talking to Skyler. Skyler asks her about Hank and his recovery. Marie tells Skyler that Hank’s mood has improved, and “he is like a maniac with PT.” Walt Jr. drives Hank to a fried chicken restaurant, Dos Hermanos, that Gus Fring, the local drug “boss” uses as a front.

Miraculously, Hank can now walk with a walker, and no orthosis. Hank remarks, “Jesus, ain’t we a pair.”

Later in the episode, Hank walks into the DEA office, this time using a cane. Miraculous! Hank is in a meeting with Gomez and George Merkert, the agent in charge of the Albuquerque DEA office. Merkert is very complimentary of Hank walking again, and remarks that he “can’t tell you what that means to all of us.” Hank says it is because of “clean living and vitamin pills.” It seems that people that work for the DEA really see walking as the only method of moving from one place to another. Hank’s rapid recovery is very problematic. In a matter of a month, or less, Hank has gone from not walking, to using a walker with no leg braces, to using a cane. That would suggest to people that are watching that have no experience with a spinal cord injury that someone in a wheelchair just didn’t put in the hard work and time with physical therapy.

Walter has seemingly become Hank’s chauffeur in season four, episode eleven, *Crawl Space*, as Hank does not drive. A lot of that is to build tension between Walter and Hank, but part of that is also that Hank has not learned to drive a car with appropriate hand controls after his injury. Walter ends up purposefully wrecking his car, with Hank as a passenger, to avoid suspicion about Walter’s drug manufacturing. The White family is at the Schrader’s house, and everyone is checking up on Hank. Marie ends Walter’s position as Hank’s chauffeur. Hank says he ordered a “gimp mobile,” a handicapped accessible car. Hank’s character enforces Barnes’s “disabled as a burden” stereotype, because Hank says he “needs to stop being a damn burden to everyone.” As Hank has stated he is getting a car equipped with hand controls, maybe this is a bit positive, too.

In season five, episode four, *Fifty-One*, Hank is back at work, full-time. Hank walks with a limp. A DEA administrator is in part-time as Merkert's replacement and offers that job to Hank. This moment could have been a great representation of disability, in that a disabled person becoming the head administrator of a DEA office would be a big breakthrough. However, Hank's disability or the diversity of having a disabled special agent are never mentioned. The stereotype at play here is Barnes that disabled people are "incapable of participating in community life," which Barnes calls a stereotype of omission (Cumberbatch and Negrene, 1992, p. 136 as cited by Barnes, 1992, p. 34). Omission because as Barnes states, "less than one and a half percent of all characters portrayed" are disabled (Cumberbatch and Negrene, 1992, p. 136 as cited by Barnes, 1992, p. 34). Hank could be a strong representation of disability in a very strong character, but the decision of the writers on the show to ignore Hank's disability is problematic. Hank, though still disabled, does not have any interactions about his ability or lack of ability for the duration of the series.

*Hank and Marie and the Medical Model of Disabilities Versus the Social Model of Disabilities*

Hank is in the hospital post-surgery in season three episode nine, *Kafkaesque*, and is in pain. The doctor comes into the room, and starts testing Hank's sensation on his feet, and Hank indicates that he cannot feel anything. Hank indicates that he can feel something about half-way between his ankle and his knee on the front of his shin. Marie asks the doctor if Hank's sensation is good news, and the doctor mentions that Hank appears to have some nerve function returning. Marie excitedly asks the doctor "when will we get him walking again?"

In another room without Hank, the doctor tells Marie that Hank will need “many months of hard work,” and even then, the odds are “not great.” Marie suggests that the doctor can’t know for sure, and Hank should get physical therapy (PT) seven days a week as soon as possible. The social worker tells Marie that Hank’s insurance covers four sessions a week. Marie asks the doctor that if Hank had more PT sessions, “would it be more likely that he would walk?” The doctor tells Marie that he could not say that with any certainty. The social worker tells Marie that she should not go out of the network for PT, and then mentions all of the extra costs involved with a disability, like home health care and modifications for access. Marie is undaunted and wants the best physical therapists available for Hank.

With Hank’s law enforcement experience, and Marie’s medical experience, they both heavily enforce the medical model of disabilities. Being disabled is not what anyone wants, but Hank and Marie hope for a miracle for Hank to walk again. I guess stereotypically, a law enforcement agent might put more trust and faith in institutions like medical doctors and treatment to cure any medical issues.

In season three, episode eleven, *Abiquiu*, Hank is suspended above a walking platform, in a PT session. The physical therapist is trying to get Hank to take a step, but it is too painful for him. Marie suggests that pain “is weakness leaving your body.” Hank is frustrated and in pain and ends the PT session. Walt Jr. tries to be uplifting, telling Hank “you can do it,” but Hank is rude to Walt Jr. and asks him to leave.

Marie goes to see Hank in the hospital and tells him he will be released at the end of the week. Hank asserts that he isn’t leaving the hospital “‘til I’m well.” Hank seems to be insisting he will stay in the hospital until he can walk again, a full-throated

endorsement of the medical model of disabilities. Marie tells Hank he is getting stronger, and he can do PT at home. Marie tells Hank she made some changes and put a hospital bed in Hank's room. Hank gets very angry at Marie and tells her to "get that out of my house." Hank then tells Marie, "I leave this hospital, when I walk out of here, understand?"

People grieve the loss of function and a typical life in different ways, but the reality is that no matter how much physical therapy a person undertakes, some things are not possible. Hank and Marie completely reject the social model of disabilities, because the things that a disabled person depends on to live with a disability, such as an accessible bathroom, a lightweight wheelchair, an accessible car, and other life tools are rejected out of hand, mostly by Hank. Interesting that the bathroom was not accessible, but Marie got a hospital bed for Hank.

#### *Positive Representations of Disability by Hank*

In season three, episode twelve, *Half Measures*, Marie is giving Hank a bath in the hospital bed. Marie asks if Hank wants to be "lying in a hospital bed." Marie tells Hank it is time to go home, but Hank insists, "not until I'm well." Marie begins manipulating Hank's penis with her hand, and bets Hank that if he obtains an erection, he will go home. Hank asks what that will prove, and Marie responds that will prove that "you're not completely hopeless." Hank decides to take Marie's bet. The next scene shows a sullen Hank in a wheelchair, being rolled out of his hospital room, with a smiling Marie behind him. Even though Marie is seemingly questioning whether Hank has any worth if he is not sexually aroused, this does show Hank in a positive sexual light, rather than the sexually abnormal stereotype that has perpetuated in media.

In season four, episode three, *Open House*, Hank is watching pornography when Marie enters the house, which could be seen as the sexually abnormal stereotype for a disabled person. Hank grabs the television remote and hurriedly turns the television off. Marie has gone out her way to get things that Hank will appreciate, but Hank's only comment is that Marie got the wrong snacks. Hank's behavior is insufferable.

Just afterward, Albuquerque detective Tim Roberts comes to the Schrader house and asks Marie to see Hank. Detective Roberts wants to get Hank's help regarding a murder with illegal drugs as an angle. Hank quips, "What am I, Ironside?" This is the first hint that Hank is being accepting of his disability. Self-deprecating humor is typical, and Hank making a joke at his expense is a very typical event. However, Hank asks if Detective Robbins is giving Hank something to do out of charity. Robbins tells Hank that because of Hank's background with the DEA, that Hank's knowledge could be useful. Hank tells Robbins that he's "lying there like third base . . . I'm not even useful to myself." Robbins asks Hank to reconsider, and Hank tells him "whatever" and motions for Robbins to leave the portfolio on a table. Hank gazes at the portfolio after Robbins leaves, but turns on the television. Later, Hank grabs part of Robbin's portfolio, and starts intensely reading the material.

Rather than having an able-bodied person give Hank a "get tough" speech, the writers had Hank to use the portfolio from Robbins as the impetus to cause Hank to move back into society. This scene is positive because Hank, while questioning his usefulness, does make a joke at his expense. In addition, Hank's attention to the information that Robbins dropped off inspires Hank to want to start working again at the DEA.

In season four, episode four, *Bullet Points*, Walter, Skyler, and Walt Jr. are having dinner at the Schrader's house. Hank mentions the gravity of Walter's "gambling problem," and suggests that if Walter wants to talk, he "isn't going anywhere" and motions about his wheelchair. Walter also tells Hank that if he wants to talk, he can tell Walter anything. This leads Hank to get the portfolio out to ask Walter some questions. This scene is a very positive scene for Hank. Hank is fully engaged in the portfolio from Robbins, and his DEA passion for finding illegal drugs and drug dealers is being re-kindled, regardless of his disability. The portfolio is a great catalyst for Hank to become engaged in society again.

In season four, episode five, *Shotgun*, Detective Robbins arrives at the Schrader house to see Hank. Robbins tells Hank he will keep him apprised of any updated information about the case. Marie comes home, and sees Hank pouring over some papers. Upon asking Hank about the papers, Hank says Detective Robbins dropped off some additional work on the murder case on which Hank was assisting. Hank apologizes for making a bit of a mess. Marie is glad to see Hank interested in working again. Once again, a very positive representation. Hank is no longer belligerent and sarcastic with Marie and is not slovenly anymore.

Hank is a complex and mixed representation of disabilities, mostly negative. While Hank's character doesn't evidence a lot of stereotypes, the biggest problem with Hank is that being disabled is so distasteful to him, and walking is so important, that any of the positive aspects Hank could have represented for disabilities are outweighed by the overt reliance on the medical model of disabilities. Between Hank denying that Walt Jr. was disabled, to Hank's insistence of walking out of the hospital, to the writers

completely ignoring the positive aspect of a person with a spinal cord injury being an administrator for the DEA, Hank is a mixed representation of disabilities at best.

### Hector Salamanca

Hector Salamanca is the uncle, “tío,” of one of the drug dealers in the series, Tuco Salamanca. Hector has a backstory and significant history in the series, but that is unknown at this point. Hector uses a wheelchair for mobility and does not speak as the result of a stroke. Prior to the stroke, Hector was a very violent and sadistic drug “boss.” Hector makes his first appearance in season two, episode two, *Grilled*. Walter and Jesse Pinkman, Walter’s chemistry student cum drug manufacturing partner, have been kidnapped by Tuco Salamanca. Tuco takes Walter and Jesse to Hector’s house in the desert, because Tuco believes Walter and Jesse are working for the DEA.

The first shot with Hector shows him in the remote desert house, watching television. Hector has an oxygen line and appears to be unresponsive to any stimulus. Assuming Hector is unable to comprehend anything, Walter and Jesse hatch a plan to kill Tuco by poisoning his food. However, Hector has a brass bell affixed to the arm of his wheelchair and uses that to communicate. Before Tuco eats the poisoned food, Hector rings his bell to get Tuco’s attention. Hector slings the poisoned food onto the floor. Tuco gets angry and questions Hector’s intentions. Hector weakly points his finger toward Walter.

Later, Hector repeatedly rings his bell to get Tuco’s attention, while Hector is looking directly at Walter. Tuco suggests to Hector that he doesn’t like Walter, and Hector rings his bell once for “yes.” The absence of a bell ring is Hector’s way of communicating “no.” Tuco asks Hector if he doesn’t trust Walter and Jesse, and Hector

rings the bell. Walter and Jesse are getting more and more nervous with every bell ring. Tuco asks if Walter and Jesse did something that Hector didn't like, and Hector rings the bell. Tuco gets angry and starts fighting with Jesse, and they spill out of the house onto the grounds. Walter and Jesse manage to incapacitate Tuco, and they leave the house. Hank kills Tuco outside of the house, and the episode ends with Hector ringing his bell in the house, as the scene fades to black.

Hector is the strongest disability representation in this series. Initially, Hector is set up to be an object of pity, or merely a curio to add to the insanity of the setting and the story. However, Hector uses his eyes and his bell to communicate well with Tuco and others. When Hector pushed the poisoned food off of the table, in an act of self-preservation, his desire to live does not evidence anyone sad with life, pitiful, evil, or any of the typical stereotypes. Of course, Hector Salamanca is a sadistic, violent former drug kingpin, too, but that is unknown about Hector at this point in the series.

In season two, episode three, *Bit by a Dead Bee*, Jesse is arrested because his car was at Hector's house, where the shootout that killed Tuco's occurred. Jesse is in jail, being questioned by Hank and his partner, Gomez. You hear Hector's bell ring off screen. As Jesse looks into the hall of the DEA office, he sees Hector, who has been brought in for questioning in connection with Tuco's killing. Hector briefly looks at Jesse and then looks down into his lap.

As Hank and Gomez question Hector, Hector has a laser focused stare at Jesse. Jesse states that Hector is not lucid, and "doesn't know what planet we're on!" Gomez asks Hector if he is on Mars or Saturn, and Hector does not ring his bell. When Gomez asks if he is on Earth, Hector rings the bell. Gomez asks Hector if Jesse was at his house,

and to Jesse's surprise, Hector does not ring his bell. Hank asks if Jesse was doing business with Tuco, and Hector does not ring his bell. Hank asks Hector if he will help them out, and Hector looks at Hank and defecates. As angry as Hector may have been at Jesse for being involved in killing his nephew, Tuco, Hector's distaste for the DEA outweighs that anger. Hector once again is a strong representation in that rather than be state's evidence in the killing of his nephew, Hector chooses to disrupt the state's case. Gomez mentions to Hank later that Hector is "OG," and "stroke or no stroke, old school gang-bang Mexicans don't help the feds."

Hector's next appearance comes in season three, episode two, *Caballo Sin Nombre*, at Casa Tranquila, a nursing home where he has been living since Tuco's death. Hector is sitting with Lionel and Marco Salamanca, The Cousins. They have a Ouija board, and Hector is spelling something, by ringing his bell when a Cousin's finger is on the letter Hector desires. Hector has spelled "Walter White," and when one of The Cousins shows Hector what was spelled, he rings the bell repeatedly, and attempts to scowl in anger. This is sort of an endorsement of the medical model of disabilities, but Hector's character is not making a statement about any models of disability. He is set on revenge against Gus Fring and will use anything at his disposal to extract revenge, from The Cousins to later, Walter White.

In season three, episode four, *I.F.T.*, The Cousins take Hector to meet with Gus Fring and Juan Bolsa, a Mexican "boss." The meeting is in a trailer, and there is no ramp, for which Gus apologizes to Hector. Juan explains to Gus the situation with the Mexican cartel and Gus's territory. Juan also explains that Hector wants Walter White killed because of the incident with Tuco, and Hector rings his bell in agreement. Gus suggests

that as Walter is working for him now, that Hector should wait to kill Walter, which angers Hector. Hector starts ringing his bell furiously.

In season four, episode eight, *Hermanos*, Hector is watching news coverage of The Cousins death on television at Casa Tranquila. Gus Fring enters the room and pulls up a chair across from Hector. Fring tells Hector about The Cousins and Juan Bolsa's death. The news is making Hector very angry, and he is shaking.

Fring visits Hector again at Casa Tranquila, and asks Hector "is today the day?" A flashback reveals why Hector and Fring have tension. As the scene switches to present day, Fring is gloating to Hector about now being in a position of power, and that makes Hector seethe with anger. Fring pats Hector on the shoulder as he walks away, leaving Hector to drool on himself.

In season four, episode eleven, *Crawl Space*, Gus Fring and Jesse Pinkman go to see to Hector at Casa Tranquila. Fring tells Hector that he has killed some of Hector's former drug cartel friends in Mexico. Gus shows Hector a necklace one of Hector's friend wore to prove his boasting. Hector is visibly angry and shaking. Gus further tells Hector that Jesse shot his only grandson, leaving Hector as the last Salamanca in his blood line. Hector never acknowledges Fring.

In season four, episode thirteen, *Face Off*, Walter goes to see Hector at Casa Tranquila. Hector initially gets visibly angry and upset at the sight of Walter. Walter tells Hector that while Hector would like to see Walter dead, that Walter can help Hector kill Gus Fring.

Hector gets in touch with the DEA, and arranges a meeting, but only wants to speak with Hank. At the DEA office, Hector only spells profane words to Hank, so the

visit was of no use to Hank. However, Hector's visit to the DEA office was to alert Gus Fring's lookouts, and to draw Fring to Casa Tranquila to visit Hector. When Hector returns to Casa Tranquila, Walter emerges from the bathroom and confirms that Hector will help Walter kill Fring.

Gus arrives at Casa Tranquila, and asks Hector, "What kind of man talks to the DEA? No man." Fring sits down across from Hector, and one of Fring's henchmen prepares a needle meant to kill Hector. Fring continues to berate Hector, referring to him as a "cripple little rata (rat in Spanish)." Fring gets the needle from the henchman and tells Hector, "last chance to look at me, Hector." As Fring starts to inject Hector with the needle, Hector looks him in the eyes, and starts to tear up, but then gets very angry and starts ringing his bell. The camera shows wires leading from Hector's bell to a bomb Walter has planted under Hector's wheelchair. Fring notices, and tries to get out, but the bomb blows up, killing Hector, the henchman, and Fring.

All of Hector's screen time after his stroke evidences a strong person, that has no regard for his disability. Hector's initial scene with Jesse and Walter, shows him playing a game with them. Hector doesn't identify Jesse Pinkman to the DEA, because as much as he might not have liked Pinkman for being involved with killing Tuco, he dislikes the DEA more. Fring and Hector have a history because many years earlier, Hector killed Fring's partner in his restaurant business. Fring enjoyed extracting revenge on Hector's cartel and Hector's friends. Gus reveled in Hector's family getting killed. And at the end, Hector takes the opportunity to extract out the ultimate revenge on Fring, killing himself in the process. The ultimate in agency.

*Breaking Bad* has mostly positive representations of disabilities, save for the misstep with Hank and his return to work. Had Hank's disability been given more attention and texture, *Breaking Bad* would be even better. Hank and Marie's enforcement of the medical model of disabilities is also problematic. Certainly, anyone that has incurred a spinal injury will need physical therapy, and there is no way to suggest that a person with a spinal injury would not have any relationship with the medical model of disabilities. However, walking is not the apex of humanity, and a disability is not a death sentence. As an external example, Dr. Steven Hawking had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), was married twice and fathered three children, in addition also being a best-selling author and award-winning physicist. Walter Jr. is a typical high school teenager that has the wants and needs as anyone else, he just happens to have Cerebral Palsy. While other characters may react to Walt Jr. in a stereotypical manner, Walt Jr. does not enforce any stereotypical behavior. Hector Salamanca was a brutal, sadistic and cruel man prior to having a stroke, and he lived his last breath extracting revenge on a rival. Out of the three series analyzed, *Breaking Bad* contains the best writing and the best disability representations.

## CHAPTER VI – CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to conduct a close reading and critical discourse analysis on the prime-time television serials *Speechless*, *Atypical*, and *Breaking Bad*. What was discovered is that the serials analyzed in this work contained significantly better representations than most historical serials that were considered in the research leading up to this analysis. The three serials also contained better representations than much of the contemporaneous serials researched, as well. All three shows contain examples of the medical model of disabilities as well as the social model of disabilities. In addition, while some classic stereotypes of disabilities do appear in all three serials, the reasons for the stereotypes differed in a few ways.

More often than not, *Speechless* uses a stereotype to point out the ridiculousness of the stereotype as it applies to JJ DiMeo. Watching Kenneth Clements using JJ's "inspiration" treatment to point out the ridiculousness of that stereotype does not serve to enforce the stereotype but would hopefully cause a typical viewer to question that characteristic applied to other situations involving a disabled person. Similarly, how Dr. Miller and Mr. Powers were both misguided and overly sensitive regarding JJ is pointedly taking a hammer to the overtly politically correct treatment that some disabled people receive. The most interesting part about researching *Speechless* was this quote from Scott Silveri, however, "I think we've been able to carve out a sort of unique and sometimes subversive tack without even delving into the political at all (Bernstein, 2019). Creating a prime-time serial that aired on a major network with a disabled star actually played by a disabled actor is a political message, whether that is what Silveri intended or not.

Over time, *Speechless* changed, but not in regard to falling into stereotypes to paint a picture of JJ. If anything, the desire to have the audience feel good about JJ and by extension, feel good about disabled people, blunted any significant points that could have been made with the show. Silveri had a great opportunity to explore what Jenny Morris (1993) states about being disabled, that the able-bodied world has the effect of deflating a disabled person because of the “rejection and revulsion” (p.104). It is possible that since Silveri is able-bodied, he didn’t have first-hand regarding the able-bodied gaze that he could bring to the show. However, as the brother of a disabled person, he surely saw how people reacted to his brother and his family, since has stated that was part of the reason that *Speechless* was created (Broverman, 2016, p. 30). To escape from life, doubtless anyone that stumbled onto *Speechless* might recoil if the person faced with raw reality.

*Atypical*, after the first season, anyway, offers a lot of interesting interactions with and representations of people on the autism spectrum. Robia Rashid never admits that she was using a scatter gun approach to someone on the autism spectrum, or that she was painting a composite picture of a person on the autism spectrum when she created the series, but that is the reality of the first season. *Atypical* shares something in common with a contemporaneous serial, *The Good Doctor*, in that the focus of the shows are both on the autism spectrum. Another similarity to *the Good Doctor*, is that Dr. Shaun Murphy, the lead character in *The Good Doctor*, is played by a neurotypical actor, Freddie Highmore. In addition, both shows are also inclusive of actors on the autism spectrum in other roles. What is different, at least in the first season of *Atypical*, is that the executive producer of *The Good Doctor*, David Shore, consulted with Dr. Melissa Reiner, a top expert on the treatment and education of people on the autism spectrum

(Garrett, 2019). While Hightower, like Kier Gilchrist, is also performing in autistic drag, Hightower's performance from the beginning is more nuanced and less of a composite.

Unlike *Speechless*, *Atypical*, gets much better after the first season, as Rashid relied on an expert consultant to assist with developing Sam and the show. Much like Silveri, Rashid would probably not characterize *Atypical* as a show that purposefully set out to make a statement about the representation of disabilities. But as mentioned in connection with *Speechless*, however, simply having a character with a disability is a statement, whether that is the intent or not. The upcoming final season of *Atypical* will have a lot to do with the legacy of the show and its place in the history of disability representations.

*Breaking Bad* is significant for three distinct representations of disabilities in the characters in the series. None of the characters are the lead characters in the series, but all three occupy big roles in the show. Walt Jr.'s representation by a disabled actor puts the show above *Atypical*, if there is a hierarchy to these shows. Walt Jr.'s pointed argument with Hank about the medical model of disability versus the social model of disability is ground-breaking. No other show researched ever set the two models face to face and pointed out that Hank's insistence on walking out of the hospital might suggest that people in wheelchair should be relegated to institutions, as Walt Jr. suggested. That is a "bravo" moment in the history of disability representations on television. Then again, that is also why *Breaking Bad* is so loved by critics and the audience alike.

*Breaking Bad* really missed the chance to advocate for disabled people with Hank and his miraculously disappearing spinal injury. While it is possible that some people have put in a lifetime of physical therapy and have recovered some ability to walk, the

likelihood that Hank could do so in such a short time is dubious at best. Hank working as a DEA supervisor from a wheelchair would be a great way to undo the super cripple image of Ironside or Longstreet. In addition, Hank's miraculous recovery paints a typical disabled person as a lazy slug for not achieving the same return of function as Hank.

The strongest disability representation out of all three shows researched for this work is Hector Salamanca. Hector did not speak or walk, yet he harassed the DEA and helped to orchestrate the death of his rival, killing himself in the process. However, due to the nature of the character and the show, there were no profiles in courage or any great awards from disability groups for Hector, and that is too bad. Hector Salamanca is dead! Long live Hector Salamanca!

Television is a significant culture vehicle, and the representations being proffered by television producers serve to give cues to people regarding interactions with disabled people in viewers' daily lives. The common example of that exists in the how the dominant ideology is constructed. More textured representations of disability are important for disabled people in that realistic representations of disability can help alleviate the stigma attached to the "other" by serving to educate the typical population. By seeing a more realistic representation of disabilities, typical people will learn that they can interact with a disabled person as a person rather than a wheelchair or the butt of a joke. As seen in *Speechless* and *Atypical*, a television producer that uses consultants that specialize in the disability being represented can make a tremendous difference in the texture of the disability and the character. Regarding all three series, it is obvious that using disabled actors can bring the reality of their lives to the character and the story.

Showing the disabling aspects of life that are caused by society, from big picture items like employment discrimination to more individualized items as menial as using a handicapped parking space out of convenience without regard for the needs of disabled people, will help people alter behaviors in a positive manner. In analyzing the underlying ideologies of stereotypical representations one can see how those stereotypical representations might be used to cement the dominant ideology and narratives regarding disabled people: evil, scary, pitiable creatures that rely on medicine and social benefits for life.

This research is important for the field of disability studies, in that there is a great paucity of critical discourse analysis regarding disabilities (Grue, 2011, p. 533). Jan Grue (2011), a scholar in critical discourse analysis and disability studies, states that disabilities should be a major focus of discourse analysis given the social and political focus of critical discourse analysis (p. 533). Grue (2011) concludes that discourse analysis is a fitting method to develop disability studies as the current disability models appeared through considering discourse regarding disabilities and that discourse analysis can also play a part in changing the current models of disability, too (p. 544). Simply put, the more discourse analysis that is given to disability depictions and representation in media will contribute to the changing and future models of disability in society. This discourse analysis regarding disabled representations and the models of disability in television serials follows much of the discourse analysis about aesthetics and visual arts. More textured disability representations are helpful to help alter the discourse about disabilities and disabled people.

More research regarding disability representations is necessary and proper. While television has come a long way from the characters of Dr. Loveless from *Wild Wild West* or Fred Johnson, the One-Armed Man from *The Fugitive* as suitable representations of disabilities, the noticeable lack of disabled characters on television is out of balance when compared to the population of disabled people in the U.S. Television news coverage of disabled people, disabled people on game shows, disabled people on cooking shows, disabled guests on home decoration or home make-over shows, disabled sports competitions are all rarities and are ripe for research.

APPENDIX – LIST OF EPISODES ANALYZED

<u>program</u>	<u>season</u>	<u>episode</u>	<u>aired</u>
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>1 - P-i-Pilot</i>	9.21.2016
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>2 - N-e-New A-i-Aide</i>	9.28.2016
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>3 - B-o-n-Bonfire</i>	10.5.2016
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>4 - I-n-s-Inspirations</i>	10.12.2016
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>5 - H-a-l-Halloween</i>	10.26.2016
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>6 - D-a-t-e-Date?</i>	11.9.2016
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>11 - R-o-Road T-r-Trip</i>	1.4.2017
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>12 - H-e-r-Hero</i>	1.11.2017
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>16 - O-s-Oscar P-a-Party</i>	2.22.2017
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>19 - C-h-Cheater!</i>	4.5.2017
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>20 - R-u-n-Runaway</i>	4.26.2017
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>22 - M-a-May-Jay</i>	5.10.2017
<i>Speechless</i>	1	<i>23 - C-a-Camp</i>	5.17.2017
<i>Speechless</i>	2	<i>1 - W-e-We're B-a-Back!</i>	9.27.2017
<i>Speechless</i>	2	<i>2 - F-i-First S-e-Second F-First Day</i>	10.4.2017
<i>Speechless</i>	2	<i>4 - T-r-Training D-a-Day</i>	10.18.2017
<i>Speechless</i>	2	<i>6 - S-h-Shipping</i>	11.1.2017
<i>Speechless</i>	2	<i>9 - S-t-Star W-Wars</i>	12.6.2017
<i>Speechless</i>	2	<i>18 - N-o-Nominee</i>	3.21.2018
<i>Speechless</i>	3	<i>1 - L-o-n-London: Part 1</i>	10.5.2018
<i>Speechless</i>	3	<i>2 - L-o-n-London: Part 2</i>	10.12.2018
<i>Speechless</i>	3	<i>11 - H-Hey, You</i>	1.18.2019
<i>Atypical</i>	1	<i>1 - Antarctica</i>	8.11.2017
<i>Atypical</i>	1	<i>2 - A Human Female</i>	8.11.2017
<i>Atypical</i>	1	<i>3 - Julia Says</i>	8.11.2017
<i>Atypical</i>	1	<i>4 - A Nice Neutral Smell</i>	8.11.2017
<i>Atypical</i>	1	<i>5 - That's My Sweatshirt</i>	8.11.2017
<i>Atypical</i>	1	<i>6 - The D-Train to Bone Town</i>	8.11.2017
<i>Atypical</i>	2	<i>3 - Little Dude and the Lion</i>	9.7.2018
<i>Atypical</i>	2	<i>4 - Pants on Fire</i>	9.7.2018
<i>Atypical</i>	2	<i>5 - The Egg is Pipping</i>	9.7.2018

<i>Atypical</i>	2	8 - <i>Living at an Angle</i>	9.7.2018
<i>Atypical</i>	3	3 - <i>Cocaine Pills and Pony Mean</i>	11.1.2019
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	1	1 - <i>Pilot</i>	1.20.2008
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	1	2 - <i>Cat's in the Bag...</i>	1.27.2008
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	1	3 - <i>...And the Bag's in the River</i>	2.10.2008
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	1	4 - <i>Cancer Man</i>	2.17.2008
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	1	5 - <i>Gray Matter</i>	2.24.2008
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	1	7 - <i>A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal</i>	3.9.2008
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	2	2 - <i>Grilled</i>	3.15.2009
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	2	3 - <i>Bit by a Dead Bee</i>	3.22.2009
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	2	4 - <i>Down</i>	3.29.2009
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	2	10 - <i>Over</i>	5.10.2009
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	3	2 - <i>Caballo sin Nombre</i>	3.28.2010
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	3	3 - <i>I.F.T.</i>	4.4.2010
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	3	7 - <i>One Minute</i>	5.2.2010
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	3	8 - <i>I See You</i>	5.9.2010
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	3	9 - <i>Kafkaesque</i>	5.16.2010
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	3	11 - <i>Abiquiu</i>	5.30.2010
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	3	12 - <i>Half Measures</i>	6.6.2010
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	4	1 - <i>Box Cutter</i>	7.17.2011
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	4	2 - <i>Thirty-Eight Snub</i>	7.24.2011
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	4	3 - <i>Open House</i>	7.31.2011
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	4	4 - <i>Bullet Points</i>	8.7.2011
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	4	5 - <i>Shotgun</i>	8.14.2011
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	4	6 - <i>Cornered</i>	8.21.2011
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	4	7 - <i>Problem Dog</i>	8.28.2011
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	4	8 - <i>Hermanos</i>	9.4.2011
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	4	10 - <i>Salud</i>	9.18.2011
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	4	11 - <i>Crawl Space</i>	9.25.2011
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	4	13 - <i>Face Off</i>	10.9.2011
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	5	4 - <i>Fifty-One</i>	8.5.2012
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	5	14 - <i>Ozymandias</i>	9.15.2013
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	5	15 - <i>Granite State</i>	9.22.2013

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