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Rejection or Celebration? Autistic Representation in Sitcom Television

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ABSTRACT *In recent years, autistic-coded characters have become a common staple in sitcoms. This paper will examine depictions of autistic-coded characters in two such sitcoms: CBS's* The Big Bang Theory (Big Bang)*, and NBC's* Community*. Sheldon on* Big Bang *is stereotyped and mistreated by his friends, while Abed on* Community *challenges stereotypes and is beloved. The different treatment of autistic characters stems from the responses of the shows' writers to the fear of accidentally misrepresenting autism, with the crew of* Big Bang *choosing to avoid the label of autism, while* Community *embraced it and did research to better represent autistic people. This difference has a huge impact on audiences watching the shows. Seeing Sheldon's friends belittling him because of his autistic-coded traits triggers shame in autistic viewers, while also validating ableist thought patterns in neurotypical viewers. In* Community*, however, seeing Abed's confidence in his autistic embodiment serves to boost the confidence of autistic viewers, while his friends' and classmates' love and support of him serves as a model for neurotypical viewers of how to best interact with autistic people in the real world. The case of these two shows illustrates two important facts about autistic representation in media: failing to diagnose a character does not exempt a writer from ableist representations, and to avoid this ableism it is important to listen to audience feedback and do research to properly understand the characters from the perspective of the communities they stand for.*

KEYWORDS autistic characters; ableism; autistic stereotypes; autistic representation; representation politics

Rejection or Celebration? Autistic Representation in Sitcom Television

Television in the past few decades has featured an increasing number of autistic and autistic-coded characters. In comedies they are the socially awkward nerds whose lack of social awareness leads to hilarious misunderstandings. In dramas they are either the scientist prodigy or the

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pitiable child-like person who serves to inspire the neurotypical characters around them. Very few stories depict autistic characters as realistic people, and even fewer are guided by the input of real autistic people rather than just testimony of parents or doctors.

This essay will focus on two shows: CBS's *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre & Prady, 2007-2019), and NBC's *Community* (Harmon, 2009-2014). In many ways, these two shows are very similar. Both are half-hour sitcoms featuring an ensemble cast, and both largely take place at American colleges. *The Big Bang Theory* premiered in 2007, and *Community* in 2009, putting them in the same time period. And, importantly to this piece, both feature an autistic-coded character. Despite these similarities, the shows deal with their autistic-coded characters very differently, with *Big Bang* ridiculing him, while *Community* shows him love and respect.

By considering both the text of the shows and comments made by writers and producers, this essay will examine the positive and negative portrayals of autism on these two shows and the impacts they have on both autistic and neurotypical viewers.

The Shows

The Big Bang Theory is about four physicist friends, two of whom are roommates, and their somewhat "ditsy" neighbour across the hall. The main cast of *Big Bang* represent a wide range of religious backgrounds, though the four physicists are all male and all but one is white. What diversity exists within the main cast is rarely explored beyond the occasional one-line joke, and seldom has any influence on the plot of an episode.

The autistic-coded character in *The Big Bang Theory* is Sheldon Cooper, played by Jim Parsons. Sheldon is a white man from a conservative Christian family, though Sheldon himself is atheist. Throughout the show, Sheldon is depicted as a brilliant physicist but socially inept. He uses charts and contracts to navigate social situations, indicates sarcasm with the word "bazinga," follows a strict routine, refuses to let anybody sit in his spot on the couch, and shows special interest in science and science fiction. While Sheldon has never been confirmed as autistic on the show, many viewers see him as autistic, to the point where *Slate.com* reported that Sheldon is "poised to become a pop-culture emblem of the Aspie" (Collins, 2009).[1] As will be demonstrated later, this autistic coding without confirming Sheldon as autistic has a strong negative impact on the lives of real autistic people.

Community follows a group of seven community college students who form a study group and quickly grow into a found family. The characters represent a wide range of ages, races, genders and religions. Unlike *Big Bang*,

[1] The term "Aspie," short for "Asperger Syndrome," refers to a person on the "high-functioning end" of the autism spectrum.

the diversity of the main cast of *Community* is fundamental to the show, and many episodes' plots revolve around navigating those differences and learning to accept one another, an attitude which extends to accepting neurodivergence.

In *Community*, the autistic character is Abed Nadir, played by Danny Pudi. Abed is an Arab-Polish Muslim man – though his actor is Polish-Indian – who often has difficulty in social situations, finding it hard to read emotion or know how to react to things. He has a special interest in film and television, and over the course of the series he becomes a filmmaker himself. Abed displays face blindness, sensory issues, shutdowns, and has a hard time with change, all common autistic traits. Though Abed's autism is not discussed in depth in the show, it is addressed both in the show itself and by the show's creators. The word "Asperger's" is used to describe Abed in the first episode, showing an early intention to make it part of his character (Harmon et al., 2009), and in later seasons Abed refers to himself as "on the spectrum" (Basilone & Mebane, 2011) and compares himself to the trope of the "mildly autistic super-detective" (Sommers & Shapeero, 2014). By confirming Abed as autistic and representing a wide range of autistic traits, *Community* has a positive influence on the lives of autistic people.

Good and Bad Depictions

While both Sheldon and Abed fill the "nerdy outsider" niche in their respective stories, the narrative roles they play are very different. In general, Sheldon replicates stereotypes of autistic people, while Abed challenges them.

These differences begin with the demographic categories into which the characters fall. Like most autistic-coded characters in media, Sheldon is a white atheist man, a scientific prodigy, with a strong interest in comic books and trains. Abed, by contrast, is a biracial Muslim man, and his interests and talents lie primarily in the creative field of filmmaking rather than scientific fact. While Abed, like Sheldon, shows interest in comic book characters, especially Batman, he explores these interests through costumes and roleplay, as opposed to Sheldon's engagement mostly with the media itself. The interests expressed by Abed, as well as the demographic categories he falls into, challenge the stereotype of autistic people as lacking imagination as well as them only being white men.

Another common stereotype often found in media about autistic people is the trope of the "idiot savant." This trope, popularized by the 1988 film *Rain Man*, refers to an autistic or autistic-coded character who is socially inept but displays superhuman abilities in a specific subject, often science or math. This trope is both problematic and inaccurate: only one in 10 autistic people demonstrate any savant skills, and among those even fewer have traits to the extent often depicted in media (Gambacurta, 2020). In *Big Bang*, this trope

goes unchallenged. Sheldon's talents in math and science go far beyond the average, and this is largely shown to be his main redeeming quality and the reason that both the university and his friends tolerate him. By playing into this trope, *Big Bang* reinforces commonly held stereotypes about autistic people.

Unlike Sheldon, although Abed has a strong memory for the things he cares about, these talents do not approach the superhuman levels common in savant characters. Furthermore, not only does *Community* avoid playing into this trope, it actively challenges it. In the episode "Basic Intergluteal Numismatics" (Sommers & Shapeero, 2014), the dean asks for Abed's help solving a crime because he's "special" and should therefore be able to "just stand at the scene of the crime and see what happened." Abed responds to this by mocking him for "using a social disorder as a procedural device" before giving him an unimpressed look and leaving the room. This short scene explicitly refuses to engage with the savant trope and also calls out every other show that uses it as a plot device.

One trait that Sheldon and Abed share is a difficulty in social situations. Both characters at times do or say things that other characters find inappropriate or insensitive without realizing they are doing so. However, the nature of these transgressions, as well as the ways they are handled narratively, are very different. Sheldon's social missteps are often acts of outright bigotry played off for a laugh. For example, in "The Egg Salad Equivalency" (Molaro, Prady, et al., 2013), an HR administrator at the university where he works has a meeting with him to discuss a complaint of sexual harassment. Sheldon not only stands by the sexist comments that got him called for a meeting in the first place, he doubles down, calling the HR administrator and all other women "slaves to their desires," especially at certain times of their menstrual cycle. While the administrator is shown looking offended by these comments, they are not explicitly acknowledged as inappropriate and there are no lasting consequences for his actions. Having the autistic-coded character make these comments has two major implications: first, the very real impacts of sexism are downplayed as a funny social misstep from a quirky character, thus naturalizing a gender hierarchy; and second, autistic traits are associated with inappropriate and violent behaviour, reinforcing the idea of autistic people as inherently unpleasant.

Abed also has moments of social ineptitude where he inadvertently offends people, but unlike Sheldon these missteps are very rarely bigoted or cruel. In the rare cases where Abed does something truly offensive or hurtful, the consequences of his actions are shown in the narrative and he shows remorse and makes amends with the people he harmed. For example, in the episode "Aerodynamics of Gender" (Countee, 2010), Abed's friends encourage him to be rude to people whom they perceive as "bad girls." His insulting comments escalate to the point where nobody wants to be around him, and he is left alone and friendless. Upon realizing the consequences of his actions, Abed allows himself to be publicly humiliated by the people he hurt so that

the rest of the school can understand that he doesn't think of himself as better than them, and he apologizes to his friends. By showing consequences for Abed's offensive actions, and his remorse upon realizing he made a mistake, the writers of *Community* illustrate that bigotry is not acceptable, and that autistic people are not inherently bigoted or cruel and are capable of remorse and change.

Another major difference between the two shows' attitudes toward the autistic neurotype is illustrated by a phrase commonly used on *Big Bang*: "I'm not crazy, my mother had me tested." Sheldon says this often enough to have become a catchphrase, depicted on merchandise such as shirts and mugs (e.g., TV Doodles, n.d.). There are many implications to this phrase. The first is an association of Sheldon's autistic-coded traits with the negatively charged term "crazy" rather than a value-neutral difference in neurology as advocated by many autistic people. Second, the phrase implies that "craziness" and neurodivergence are inherently bad things that are offensive to imply about somebody. Third, the statement denies that Sheldon is in any way neurologically different from the other characters, the impacts of which will be explored later in this essay. Finally, the implication that Sheldon can't be "crazy" because a doctor said he wasn't embodies a medical model of disability, in which mental wellness or unwellness is defined by doctors rather than by the impacts of an individual's neurology on their life.

Community also deals with the idea of Abed being "crazy," but does so in a very different way. In a reversal of *Big Bang*'s implication that Sheldon may be crazy, the *Community* episode "Horror Fiction in Seven Spooky Steps" (Harmon & Shapeero, 2011) features the study group taking psychological tests, which reveal that most of them are "deeply disturbed" and Abed is the only sane one among them. This does two important things: first, it shows that Abed's autism is not something that inherently makes him dangerous or disturbed. Far from the trope of neurologically disabled people being unfeeling and dangerous, Abed is explicitly the least dangerous and most well-adjusted one of the group. Second, the fact that every other member of the study group tested positive for "an extreme personality disorder" effectively destigmatizes those issues and shows that they are a normal part of human diversity.

Another episode in which *Community* deals with the idea of mental health issues or "craziness" is "Introduction to Film" (Hobert et al., 2009), in which Abed makes an autobiographical film about his relationship with his parents. The film features scenes of his parents fighting about Abed being "not normal," images of brain scans over audio of a crying baby, and an internalized belief that his differences were the reason for his parents' divorce. The implication of the film is that his parents misunderstood him and that these misunderstandings led to stress for both them and him. The distress and history of trauma Abed expresses in this film are not inherent to his disability. He is not wishing he weren't autistic, but rather that his parents had been more accepting of him as he was. This is in line with the social

model of disability, under which disability is conceived as not inherent to divergent bodies but rather constructed by an inaccessible or unaccepting society (Shakespeare, 2013). Upon seeing the film, Abed's father cries and expresses regret about not understanding his son, and agrees to pay for a filmmaking class so Abed can learn to express himself. While Sheldon's flippant reminders that he is "not crazy, my mother had me tested" show a reliance on the medical system to define disability, Abed's film illustrates the traumas that such systems can cause and the transformative power of accommodating rather than repressing autistic traits.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the way the two characters are written, however, comes not from any inherent quality of the characters themselves, but how other characters interact with them. Sheldon, like many other autistic characters, is portrayed as annoying. His friends complain about being around him, call him weird, and deliberately do things to bother him for their own amusement. While he does have a romantic relationship in the later seasons of the show, that relationship is often mocked, with other characters implying it is not romantic or wondering why his female partner is attracted to him.

Abed, by contrast, is beloved by his friends and by everybody else in the school. He is very popular, is shown having a mutually fulfilling romantic relationship, is very rarely bullied, and on the rare occasions where he is being treated poorly his friends defend him against anyone who tries to make him feel inferior. This is unfortunately very unusual for an autistic or autistic-coded character. As autistic writer and activist Julia Bascom puts it: "Abed said 'I just like liking things,' and it wasn't just not-punished, it wasn't just okay – either of which would have been remarkable and unbelievable – no. It was *good*" (2012; emphasis in original). Abed is not only celebrated as an autistic character, but his autistic traits such as his special interests and love of loving things are explicitly included in that celebration. This is unheard of in most mainstream depictions of autism, where, as with Sheldon, these traits are often mocked.

Learning to Change: A Case Study

This difference in attitude is apparent in a trope to which both *Big Bang* and *Community* dedicate an episode: the autistic person's friends attempt to help them learn to become more "normal" to improve their life. In *Big Bang*, this episode is "The Closure Alternative" (Molaro, Reynolds, et al., 2013). In it, Sheldon's friends attempt to help him get over his discomfort with not having closure by asking his neuroscientist girlfriend Amy to do exposure therapy with him. Throughout the episode she is shown erasing tic tac toe games before the last move, playing all but the last line of a song, and other such incomplete things, all while an increasingly stressed Sheldon tries hard not to react. The episode ends with Sheldon, very tense with repressed stress,

bidding goodbye to Amy, then quickly running around the apartment completing everything she wouldn't let him finish. Her attempts to help him did not improve his quality of life. He still has just as much difficulty with closure as he did at the start of the episode. All that their exercise accomplished was to make Sheldon more stressed than he already was. And since he hid that stress from her, she has no way of knowing that this is what happened, and the narrative leaves her unpunished for hurting him and implies that what she did was right and that it was Sheldon's fault that he didn't improve.

In *Community*, a similar plotline is treated very differently. In the episode "Physical Education" (Miller & Russo, 2010), Abed's friends find out that another student may have a crush on Abed and conspire to help him win her heart by learning to flirt in a socially acceptable way. Much like in *Big Bang*, by the end of the episode Abed has not changed in any significant way, but unlike Sheldon, the process of being coached caused him no distress. Throughout the episode, Abed is shown apparently having fun playing at being different from how he usually is. When it becomes clear that nothing his friends have done has changed him, Abed explains that he didn't feel the need to change to get a girlfriend but he let his friends teach him because he wanted them to feel like they could help him. He went along with the plans to change himself not because he felt he needed to change to be loved, but because he made a conscious choice to follow his friends' lead to make them feel better about themselves. When asked if the process hurt his self-esteem, he says "I've got self-esteem falling out of my butt. That's why I was willing to change for you guys. Because when you really know who you are and what you like about yourself, changing for other people isn't such a big deal" (Miller & Russo, 2010).

Unlike Sheldon, Abed is shown to have full agency over who he is and what aspects of himself he does and does not change. His personality, including his autistic traits, are shown to be desirable and not something that needs to change for him to be happy or to live a full life. Ultimately, Abed doesn't succeed in attracting the woman he was flirting with, but he takes it in stride saying he doesn't mind and that plenty of women find him attractive because "let's face it, I'm pretty adorable" (Miller & Russo, 2010). This is then shown to be true as the last scenes of the episode depict an attractive woman approaching Abed to introduce herself, choosing him over Jeff, the conventionally handsome leading man.

While both of these episodes have similar themes of the friends of an autistic-coded character teaching them to hide their neurodivergent traits, the narrative treats the themes very differently. In *The Big Bang Theory*, the story is framed to be sympathetic to Sheldon's friends for having to put up with him. It implies that they were justified in trying to force him to change, even when that change causes him distress, and that Sheldon's not changing is a failure on his part. In *Community*, however, the sympathetic character in the episode is decidedly Abed. Far from needing to change to earn respect, Abed

is loved by his friends and everybody around him. In fact, his self-confidence is depicted as inspiring to his neurotypical friends, who learn from him to be less self-conscious. Not only does the autistic person not need to learn to be neurotypical to have a good life, a neurotypical character is able to improve their own life by learning lessons from an autistic character.

These episodes illustrate a fundamental difference in how the two shows understand autism and disability. *Big Bang* advocates a deficit model of disability in which autistic people can earn respect by learning the proper things to do and say to fit in with mainstream society and eliminate the differences between themselves and others. Meanwhile, *Community* depicts disability as not inherently negative, saying disabled people need acceptance and accommodation rather than to be changed or cured, and that Abed's autistic traits can in fact have a positive impact on his life. While he may be different from some of the other characters, this fact alone does not make Abed any lesser, and he has a lot to offer in his relationship with his friends.

Writing Autism

The differences between these depictions of autism begin in the writers' room. Despite autistic and neurotypical viewers of the show alike agreeing that Sheldon Cooper clearly displays autistic traits, the writers on *The Big Bang Theory* have repeatedly denied that was ever their intention. When *Big Bang* co-creator Bill Prady was asked if Sheldon was meant to be autistic, he said that the writing team members "don't think his mom ever took him in for a diagnosis" (Rice, 2008). This statement shows a fundamental misunderstanding of how autism exists in the mind. Saying that Sheldon is not autistic because he never received a diagnosis shows a conception of autism as a thing that exists only when doctors say it does, rather than a way of being that people can embody with or without a formal diagnosis. Autistic people are autistic even before a doctor officially gives them the label.

This statement gives the power to determine who qualifies as autistic and what the label "autism" signifies to doctors, taking agency away from the autistic community to define itself. There is a clear disconnect between the writers of *The Big Bang Theory* and the autistic community, who are largely in favour of self-diagnosis, especially since formal diagnosis can be expensive, time-consuming, and often inaccessible, especially to working class people, women, people of colour, and those diagnosed later in life (Autistictic, 2020). The fact that the *Big Bang* writers equate Sheldon's neurotype with whether his parents took him to a doctor as a child indicates that it is unlikely the writers have ever deliberately researched autism or sought out autistic voices to influence the direction they take in their writing.

Despite the complaints about Sheldon's characterization from the autistic community, the cast and crew of *Big Bang* have repeatedly defended their decision not to confirm Sheldon's status as autistic. When asked about it,

Mayim Bialik, who plays Sheldon's girlfriend Amy on the show, said "what should not be lost on people is we don't pathologise our characters. We don't talk about medicating them or even really changing them" (crippledscholar, 2015). However, as has been shown above, this assessment of the show is incorrect. Sheldon is repeatedly expected to change by the people around him. Not providing a character with a specific diagnosis is not the same as not othering or pathologizing them. As the autistic blogger and PhD candidate known as crippledscholar (2015) explains,

> The show really does pathologize Sheldon, it just doesn't give him the explanation or defense of a label. In so doing tacitly making the judgement and the laughter at his expense acceptable because if he were acknowledged as autistic, this treatment would be considered cruel.

By not naming Sheldon as autistic, the writers of the show normalize the idea that Sheldon's autistic traits are strange, inexplicable, and acceptable to mock.

The writers' seeming choice not to research autism leaves a gap between Sheldon's character and the true autistic experience. If Sheldon is only generically eccentric rather than autistic, the writers have no reason to work to better understand and represent the lives of real autistic people. Instead, Sheldon is based on an archetype of the nerdy autistic-coded scientist, an archetype that historically has been filled with

> socially awkward/anti-social/socially maladapted, eccentric geniuses free of any serious adaptive functioning limitations, motor issues, sensory sensitivities, or language differences, able to manage independently in all major areas of daily living, with a bonus side of savant skills and the empathic range of a rock. (Bascom, 2012)

In other words, Sheldon represents a set of autistic stereotypes that have been perpetuated through media rather than an actual autistic person.

Since the writers seem to have used Sheldon's lack of diagnosis as an excuse to avoid the obligation to research autism, they miss many of the experiences common to many autistic people that have been underrepresented in media. These include the impacts of ableism, Sensory Processing Disorder, shutdowns, and the ways autistic people move and talk differently from neurotypical people. In short, Sheldon is autistic enough to laugh at, but not autistic enough to represent the autistic community.

While the writers on *Big Bang* reacted to fans' questions about Sheldon's neurotype by deliberately choosing not to acknowledge him as autistic for fear it would be a "burden to get the details right" (Sepinwall, 2019), *Community*'s head writer, Dan Harmon, went the opposite direction. When he learned that Abed was being embraced by the autistic community, he decided that he "[didn't] want to let these people down ever. They don't get a lot of role models on TV ever, and [he knows] how important that is"

(Pollack, 2012). To ensure he wouldn't get anything wrong with Abed's character, Harmon did extensive research on autism. And importantly, part of this research was to read forums where autistic people talked about their own experiences, rather than only getting the outsider perspective from doctors or parents.

Through this research, Harmon discovered that many of the autistic traits he was reading about applied to him as well. Once he realized that he was autistic himself, his process for writing Abed changed and he started to write the character's storylines by looking to his own memories (Pollack, 2012). Because he can draw on first-hand experience as an autistic person himself, as well as the lived stories of people he encountered in autism forums, he was able to write Abed in a much more accurate and nuanced way than *The Big Bang Theory* writers were able to write Sheldon. While Sheldon's autistic traits are largely based in stereotypes and mocking jokes, Abed is a representation of the experiences of actual autistic people. He has shutdowns and meltdowns, experiences discrimination, has sensitive hearing, filters experiences through the lens of his special interest in TV and movies, and even his posture and way of moving are representative of how autistic people move.

Because he took the time to research the experiences of real autistic people, and because he is autistic himself, Harmon understands that for many autistic people, autism is not an affliction or an inhibition to rise above, but in fact "the inhibition is on the part of the other people" (Pollack, 2012). *Community* avoids defining the autistic experience by a set of medically defined symptoms, focusing instead on the isolation caused by a society not built for autistic neurotypes. Abed thrives when he has a support system in place that loves him as he is, and the times he struggles most are when those supports are threatened or taken away.

Harmon isn't the only writer on the show to be invested in writing Abed in a way that is nuanced and authentic to the autistic experience. At a convention panel in 2012, executive producer Russ Krasnoff answered a fan question about the show's positive representation of autism by saying "these characters… are all flawed, and all have these issues that they're dealing with, but [we want] to write up to all of them, to respect all of them, and to give them all something to be proud of" (GreendaleSeven, 2012). The creative team behind the show understand that while Abed's disability means his struggles are different from those of his peers, ultimately all their characters are flawed in their own ways and all those differences deserve to be treated with equal respect and dignity. This positioning of autism as a facet of human experience no different from the issues faced by neurotypical characters is an attitude that few people writing autistic characters have had before or since, and it largely contributes to the show's popularity among autistic viewers.

Impact

The way that autism is represented in media has an impact on the audience, both autistic and neurotypical. Representations that rely on stereotypes and that mock autistic traits have a negative impact on autistic people and can lead neurotypical people to have misconceptions about what autism is. By contrast, positive representations that depict autistic people as full humans treated well by their peers contribute to acceptance of autism and boost the self-esteem of autistic people.

On *The Big Bang Theory*, for instance, Sheldon's difficulty with social situations often manifests as him being cruel to other characters, insulting them, insisting he knows better than them, even being sexist and racist at times. Since Sheldon is the only autistic-coded character on the show, when Sheldon does something rude or bigoted, a neurotypical viewer might be led to assume that autism inherently makes people rude and bigoted. Furthermore, because Sheldon's autism isn't named, "characters can't clarify: 'That's not his autism, that's just Sheldon.' And so autism and assholery become merged" (Hanson, 2017). This assumption can easily lead to autistic people being excluded or rejected by their neurotypical peers, who assume they will be unpleasant because of their diagnosis, before getting to know them.

This mistreatment of real autistic people because of how autism is portrayed in media is further reinforced by the way Sheldon is treated by his friends and colleagues on the show. Throughout the series, Sheldon's friends are shown insulting him, deliberately antagonizing him, and complaining about having to be around him. This normalizes the idea that autistic people are hard to be around, and that it is socially acceptable to mock and exclude them. As Jacqueline Koyanagi (2015) puts it,

> When autistically coded characters are dismissed as eccentric and worthy of disdain, it reinforces the idea that we are just being difficult. When the people around autistically coded characters are portrayed as Atlas-like martyrs for enduring such a burden, that is doing real harm to real autistic people.

When autistic-coded characters like Sheldon are shown being victims of abuse by people who supposedly care about them, and this abuse is rarely or never challenged within the show, neurotypical viewers receive the message that it is okay for them to insult or abuse the autistic people in their lives, and that they are heroes for even doing that much to be around them.

Autistic viewers, too, are impacted by negative depictions of autistic characters like Sheldon. When Sheldon's friends mock his behaviours that mimic autistic traits, autistic people can internalize the idea that those same behaviours are worthy of being mocked in them as well. This can lead to them masking these traits, even in situations in which doing so causes them distress. Furthermore, when Sheldon's friends and colleagues are depicted as

martyrs for simply continuing to exist in his presence, real autistic people can be made to feel like they are a burden on their own friends and family, regardless of whether the people in their lives actually perceive them that way.

Big Bang co-creator Bill Prady has reportedly stated that were Sheldon's autism confirmed in the show, there would be a "danger that the other characters' insults about Sheldon's behaviour – in other words, 90% of the show's comedy – would seem mean if they were mocking a medical condition as opposed to generic eccentricity" (Sepinwall, 2019). However, what Prady and the rest of the *Big Bang* writing team fail to understand is that the traits that are being mocked on the show are autistic traits, regardless of if they are acknowledged as such on the show. Real autistic people, as well as people who are not autistic but who share some of the traits that Prady labels as "generic eccentricity," perceive the characters' insults as cruel and linked to their own neurodivergence, with or without the word "autism" having been used on the show. This leads to internalized shame in autistic viewers.

Where Sheldon inspires shame, many autistic viewers have named Abed as a source of pride and joy. Autistic writer and activist Julia Bascom (2012) describes the experience of first discovering *Community* in an essay titled "Someone Who Moves Like You," saying that "how someone moves is the first thing telling you whether or not they might be able to be you, and you them. And for the first time in [her] life, she looked at a character on television and saw a *yes*" (emphasis in original). Bascom describes the experience as transformative, changing the way she thought about herself and the world because for the first time she felt represented by a character on television. Abed represented a celebration of the autistic traits that so many other shows like *The Big Bang Theory* had taught her were shameful. Abed was a symbol that she as an autistic person deserved love, respect and happiness just as much as her neurotypical peers.

Another way that shows like *Community* where autism is celebrated can have a positive influence on the lives of autistic people is by denaturalizing the abuse of autistic people. By depicting an autistic character who is loved and accepted by the people around him, *Community* provides a framework for neurotypical viewers to rethink their own privilege and the ways in which they interact with autistic people in their own lives, and for autistic people to understand that they deserve respect. *Community* challenges the idea that ableism is natural or correct, instead suggesting that there is another way to look at disability: one of acceptance and celebration.

The impact of the autism positivity expressed in *Community* extends beyond just autistic viewers. Many traits often associated with autism such as liking routine, having difficulty in social situations, or expressing enthusiasm for favourite topics in ways that are deemed socially inappropriate are far from limited to autistic people. Since many autistic-coded characters, like Sheldon Cooper, are not diagnosed within the texts they belong to, jokes at the expense of these traits hurt not just autistic viewers, but anybody who

might express those traits. And on the flip side of that same coin, when a show like *Community* celebrates these traits, it can have a positive impact on a wide range of people, not just autistic people. For instance, podcaster Bryn Monroe has said that while he doesn't have a formal autism diagnosis, he "[does] not believe [himself] to be neurotypical" and that "Abed was the first time [he] felt like [he] saw a nerd exactly like [him] on TV" (Gould, 2020). The destigmatization of autistic traits does not just improve the lives of autistic people, but of anybody who resonates with those eccentricities that are so often ridiculed.

Conclusion

The case of these two shows illustrates two important facts about autistic representation in media: failing to diagnose a character does not exempt a writer from ableist representations, and to avoid this ableism it is important to listen to audience feedback and do research to properly understand the characters from the perspective of the communities they stand for. These are lessons that media creators would do well to keep in mind going forward.

In the years since *Community* and *The Big Bang Theory* first aired, there have been many other autistic and autistic-coded characters in both film and television. It is encouraging to see that many of these stories increasingly depict autistic characters in a positive, or at least a neutral light. Unfortunately, too many have gone the same route as *The Big Bang Theory*: creating characters based in stereotypes who are treated poorly by the other characters. These depictions have a negative impact on real autistic people, both by reinforcing internalized shame and by normalizing the abuse of autistic people.

What few stories there are that depict autism in a sympathetic light still fall into many of the same tropes that make *Big Bang* harmful. Autistic characters are very often treated poorly by their peers, are expected to change themselves to gain acceptance from others, and the research that goes into the writing – if there is any at all – is most often done by reading accounts of doctors or parents. Very few shows featuring autistic characters are made in consultation with autistic people themselves, much less with an autistic executive producer and head writer like *Community* had.

This is what makes *Community* so special to autistic people. By listening to the voices of real autistic people, they were able to represent the reality of the autistic experience, rather than just a trope or stereotype. As Bascom (2012) explains, "you must understand that one story is infinitely bigger than zero, and it may still be very small and nowhere near enough, but it's *something*" (emphasis in original). It is time for more stories created by and about autistic people. The audience is here. It's time to give them the stories they need to see.

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