

The Big Bang Theory: Mad Geniuses and the Freak Show of Higher Education

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Abstract: This essay discusses the television comedy series *The Big Bang Theory*. Through lead characters including physicist Sheldon Cooper, the series portrays higher education as a metaphorical freak show, and academics as geeky mad genius freaks. Implications for constructions of disability in higher education are discussed, with recommendations for future research.

Key Words: disability, higher education, television

As of fall, 2013, *The Big Bang Theory* (*TBBT*) on CBS is the number-one comedy for viewers ages 18-49 in the United States (Bibel, 2013). When it premiered in 2007, critics expected the show to fail. CBS was perceived as a network for old people, the traditional sitcom format was no longer “cool,” and no one believed four geeky Sci-fi-loving Caltech research scientists could possibly be funny (Goldblatt, 2007; Hoerburger, 2013; Jurgensen, 2008; Weinman, 2008). Much of its acclaim since then has gone to Emmy and Golden-Globe winning actor Jim Parsons, who plays physicist Sheldon Cooper on the show.

This essay examines Sheldon Cooper and the other lead characters, the majority of whom are portrayed as scientific researchers and academics at CalTech. While the character of Sheldon is widely presumed to be autistic by media critics, *TBBT* viewers, and autistic activists, I interpret his character as a new incarnation of the “Mad Genius” trope for the 21st century. I then discuss the implications of this new geeky reincarnation of the “Mad Genius” (i.e., “Mad Scientist”) in academia as a cognitive freak whose stage show is higher education, the one place where neurodiverse freaks and their accommodations may be portrayed as “normal.” I conclude by problematizing *TBBT* as simultaneously funny, progressive, and problematic for disability studies scholars, with recommendations for further research and analyses.

Images of Higher Education and Disability in U.S. Culture

Many television and film stereotypes of academics (e.g., professors, researchers) are rooted in campus novels about students (which first appeared in the 19th century) and academic novels about faculty (which began in the 1950’s) (Leuschner, 2006). These fictional accounts of college and universities crafted several persistent stereotypes of college instructors. There was the absent-minded professor, a milder, gentler version of Frankenstein-esque mad scientists presented in earlier texts and films (Leuschner, 2006). A second typology was also a metaphor for corruption in the male-dominated world of higher education – the professor who is overtly or covertly lecherous or sadistic (Leuschner, 2006). Academic novels contributed to many of society’s understandings about the process of becoming faculty, with tenure evolving from a somewhat benign process protecting the “status quo” to something enabling unethical, comedic, or “rogue” behavior (Leuschner, 2006, pp. 339-340).

Films later refined these unfavorable images of academics. Research by Dagaz and Harger (2011) analyzed depictions of professors in primary or secondary roles of popular films from 1985 to 2005, and found that in general, professors in films were more likely to be men under the age of 60. The majority (88 percent) were White, with African-Americans over-represented, and Asian and Hispanic professors under-represented. Racial and gender stereotypes among characters were common. For example, male professors were never in the field of education, and were usually disinterested in teaching, which was portrayed as more nurturing and feminine. Instead, males focused on research, to the extent that ethics were often secondary to productivity. Female professors on the screen were under-represented in medical and science fields and were usually working in the humanities, conforming to traditional gender roles. Females were also more likely to be sexualized secondary characters; when they had tough masculine characteristics, these were mediated by emotional or feminine scenes that served as dramatic plot points. No African-American, Asian, or Hispanic professors were in business or in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, except one African-American woman who was simply a love interest for the male lead. When they appeared, African-American professors were more likely to carry a “mark of distinction” (p. 280), like glasses or bowties, as props to legitimize them as visibly non-traditional professors.

On television, higher education is still rarely a focus for an entire series, with only a few shows like *Felicity*, *Community*, or *A Different World* being entirely about college, and a few others like *Third Rock from the Sun* and *Beverly Hills 90210* making academia the backdrop but not the focus. In *90210*, for example, college life was glossed over, avoiding discussion of controversial politics, authoritarianism, diversity, and even academics, for the sake of focusing on the Greek system, extracurricular activities, and relationships between characters (Byers, 2005). Intellectualism and academics were not portrayed positively, and fears about jobs, scholarships, or money were practically non-existent (Byers, 2005; Leuschner, 2006).

In most series, like *How I Met Your Mother*, *The Vampire Diaries*, or *Glee*, college is a vehicle for plot points. College becomes a way to deal with characters who are working as professors or growing older and leaving high school; college may also become a metaphor for broader themes of the show. On television, as in movies, researchers have noted that faculty typically are intimidating, disconnected from students’ lives, boring, older, and White, with their own best interests at heart and a willingness to set aside ethics for the sake of their research, meaning students are often portrayed as more moral than their professors (Byers, 2005; Rogers, 2012).

If images of higher education are rare in television and film, explicit images or discussion of disability in higher education are practically non-existent. Professors and students with illnesses or disabilities do appear, like when characters in *Beverly Hills 90210* dealt with a friend’s HIV+ status (Byers, 2005). Disabled people are sometimes portrayed as members of outsider groups of rejects, like a wheelchair user and a blind man in the *Revenge of the Nerds* films (Dolmage, 2013). In many movies or television shows, however, freakish or disabled characters are not identified as “disabled” *per se*, like the vampire graduate students in the 1995 film *The Addiction* (McDermott & Daspit, 2005), or the freshmen vampires in television’s *The Vampire Diaries* who try to figure out how to pass as “normal” while hiding blood bags from roommates in the dorm. Leuschner has noted that professors portrayed as “ill,” “defective,” or

“deformed” can be metaphors for institutional, social, or systemic problems with the “academic body” of higher education (2006, p. 340). In some cases, the university can even seem like an asylum or a nursing home – an institution that is metaphorically institutional in the traditional sense of the word (Leuschner, 2006). Faculty members can also have major disabilities or minor ailments (e.g., being overweight or older) to humanize them in comparison to their colleagues (Leuschner, 2006).

This essay looks at characters in *The Big Bang Theory (TBBT)*, a television show revolving around seven main characters; six are scientific researchers, and five of those six are working in academia. However, rather than being a show about college and student life, or a show where college is simply a vehicle for other plot points, their research and science itself are the major focus of the show (as evidenced by the title of the series). The show has a science consultant, features frequent Nobel Prize winners as guests, and doesn’t hesitate to use academic or science jargon that is nearly unintelligible; indeed, that is part of many running gags. It is known for being extremely popular with scientists and self-proclaimed nerds and geeks, and real-life scientists are often recruited as extras for campus scenes (Dreifus, 2013). *TBBT* is also notable for being a show about disability in higher education. In the remainder of the paper, I examine *TBBT*’s lead characters as disabled, and explore what messages about disability and higher education *TBBT* may convey.

Sheldon and Colleagues as Disabled: Mad Geniuses of Academia

The Big Bang Theory started out as a series about four Caltech research scientists who fit well-known stereotypes and tropes of prime-time comedies: Leonard, who seems normal but never quite succeeds at actually being normal; Howard, an outgoing horny misogynist who is terrified of women; Raj, the starry-eyed astronomer with traditionally feminine characteristics who becomes mute every time a woman is in the room; and Sheldon, a genius who has been in universities since fifth grade, but can’t comprehend the simplest social norms even when he reads the latest research on the subject. As a foil for these men, the character of Penny, who lives across the hall, was supposed to be the “normal” one who knows pop culture and society, dates, has a sex life, is pretty, and is an actress/waitress who is smart but never attended college. In the fourth season, the show added Amy, Sheldon’s friend who is a girl (eventually called a “girlfriend”) who is as geeky as Sheldon but slightly more ambitious about a social and somewhat kinky sexual life outside of her work as a neurobiologist. Howard dates and eventually marries Bernadette, a microbiologist working for large companies who is also a bridge between the normal and geeky worlds of *TBBT* lead characters: buxom, blonde, and a former waitress, but possessing a Ph.D. and just as smart as Amy or the guys.

While following a traditional sitcom format of a live audience, and relying on traditional sitcom humor about bodies, gender, race, sex, and often low-brow fare, the show offers a twist by having much of the humor reference science and geeks instead of seemingly “normal” topics and people. Over time, the show began slowly evolving around the character of Sheldon Cooper, who does not want to be normal, and frequently wishes the normal world would leave him alone (Weinman, 2008). Executive producer Bill Prady has said that as the show continues, “Anything that upsets the ecosystem in [Sheldon’s] world seems to turn out good scripts” (Rice, 2009, n.p.). Sheldon is a tall theoretical physicist who almost always wears sci-fi t-shirts (with anything

about the Flash showing up frequently). He looks nothing like a typical leading man on television (Kelly, 2011), and was once described as having a voice that is “haughty and patrician, but also slow and faintly Southern – almost as if Katherine Hepburn had morphed into the church lady” (Kelly, 2011, p. 84). He is a geek who seems completely unlovable in many ways, but is never (or at least rarely) intentionally malicious, drawing out viewers’ empathy and sympathies, even while he is clearly unable to adequately comprehend or manage those same emotions himself (Sheffield, 2010).

Sheldon is frequently perceived to be “the most obviously autistic character on television” (Heilker, 2012, n.p.) by TV critics, psychologists, and even autistic self-advocates and activists, usually because of his obsessiveness, immersion in fictional worlds of science fiction, frequent avoidance of eye contact, and difficulty in handling emotions and social niceties (Bartlett, 2009; Bednarek, 2012; Bibel, 2010; Kelly, 2011; Walters, 2013). Examples of Sheldon’s “social incompetence” include saying the best part of friends on MySpace is not having to meet face-to-face, having to be told when gift-giving is a “non-optional social convention,” and noting that video games are better than sex because it has “high-def. graphics and enhanced weapon systems” (Weinman, 2008, p. 71). Even the actor Jim Parsons, who plays the character of Sheldon, has said, “Thinking [Sheldon’s] autistic is an easy leap for people watching the show” (Walters, 2013, p. 275).

But Parsons also explained that *TBBT* writers deliberately refuse to diagnose or label Sheldon as having Asperger’s or autism, with the show preferring to utilize some autism-like traits while also having the flexibility of moving beyond those labels and any societal assumptions or presumed implications (*Time*, 2011). Indeed, there is not a single reference in the series to Sheldon as autistic, although there are running jokes about him being a robot or alien, or rusting if he cried (e.g., “The Fuzzy Boots Corollary” (1.03); “The Proton Displacement” (7.07)). The show deliberately keeps viewers guessing about Sheldon. For example, *TBBT* creator Chuck Lorre has expressed frustration about fans wanting Sheldon to “hook up” with his girlfriend Amy, saying it’s more interesting to have a character choosing not to have typical romantic and sexual relationships (Rice, 2009). Myalm Bialik, who plays the character of Amy, has a doctorate in neuroscience in real life (like her character Amy on the show). Bialik has said Sheldon could probably not be formally diagnosed as autistic if he was a real person (Bibel, 2010).

Bialik does, however, believe the characters of Sheldon and Amy could possibly be diagnosed with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) (Bibel, 2010). Sheldon has many traits that could be called obsessions, including: a propensity to label everything, including the labeling machine; needing to knock three times when going to Penny’s (knock, knock, knock...’Penny’...knock, knock, knock...’Penny’...knock, knock, knock...’Penny’); a rigid interpretation of the lengthy roommate agreement he has with Leonard, including contingencies for zombie attacks and bowel movement time tables; a possessiveness about his “spot” on the couch; and an immersion in whatever is occupying his thoughts at a moment, whether or not anyone else is interested.

For the purposes of this paper, however, the exact diagnosis of Sheldon or any other character is not critical. I readily acknowledge that none of *TBBT* characters are ever explicitly

defined with the label of “disability;” nor do any of the characters identify themselves as disabled or members of a disability community. To identify “disability” on *TBBT*, I drew upon several definitions, since there is no universal definition among medical professionals, policymakers, or disability studies scholars (for further discussion, see, e.g., Altman, 2001; Williams, 2001).

I chose to label *TBBT* characters as disabled if they (as characters on the show) had a specific diagnosis for any kind of impairment, illness, medical condition, or psychological disorder, or if *TBBT* showed them receiving medical treatment for something. This follows what many disability studies scholars would see as a “medical model” definition of disability, where disability is usually negative, meriting a cure or medical remediation. It is an individual condition, diagnosed by medical professionals. Examples of this would include allergies, severe near-sightedness, or lactose intolerance.

But in looking for “disability,” I also looked for physical, mental, and emotional impairments, illnesses, health conditions, or other physical traits marked as significantly “different” by other characters on the show, whether positive or negative (provided that they were not directly related to race, ethnicity, or gender). The difference also had to go beyond a one-time mention or casual quirkiness (as discussed in Hirschorn, 2007), and be mentioned, joked about, or alluded to in multiple episodes or by multiple characters. Whether or not they could correlate with a specific medical diagnosis is not as relevant as the perceived physical, mental, or emotional difference itself. Examples of this would include Howard’s relationship with his mother, Bernadette’s annoying voice, and Sheldon’s high IQ.

Even though this second definition of disability is obviously subjective and problematic, it is consistent with other scholars who have done critiques of disability in film, television, and media (e.g., Adams, 2001; Bogdan, Biklen, Shapiro, & Spelkoman, 1982; Elliott, Byrd, & Byrd, 1983; Lawson & Fouts, 2004; Leuschner, 2006; McReur, 2006; Walters, 2013). More consistent with a “social model” or socio-political perspectives of disability, this definition presumes disability, like race and gender, is socially constructed and actually remains in a state of flux, depending on context and who is doing the perceiving (an especially important consideration when discussing fictional characters viewed by a television audience).

This means some characteristics (like Howard and Bernadette being very short) may not be true “disabilities” defined by medical professionals or political and legal frameworks. On the show, however, the constant commenting, jokes, and problems resulting from their height mark their stature as “different;” the physical nature of it therefore also marks it as “disability.”

Likewise, Raj’s repressed gay tendencies, preferences for traditionally feminine activities, and “ersatz homosexual marriage” to Howard (“The Maternal Capacitance” (2.15)) are all running jokes on the show and a major focus in multiple episodes (e.g., “The Transporter Malfunction” (5.20), “The Closure Alternative” (6.21)). While feminine traits, being gay, or being a metrosexual-like character certainly isn’t a disability, on the show, this set of traits merits jokes from other characters, is perceived as positive or negative in different situations, is identified as an emotional, mental, and physical difference, and manifests in Raj experiencing barriers and limitations. In other words, it becomes a “disability” for Raj on *TBBT*. This flexible

definition evolving from *TBBT* itself also allows for critique of how interactions between characters, multiple attributes of characters, and different environments may work together in shaping constructions of disability.

Returning to a discussion of Sheldon, further evidence of Sheldon as mentally disabled (i.e., a more current term for “mentally ill” or “psychologically disabled,” as explained by Price, 2011, p. 9) is the fact that while no other characters call him autistic, they frequently call him “crazy,” “insane,” “nuts,” and terms like “Dr. Wackadoodle.” This occurs even when they are being affectionate or talking about him fondly. The discourse within *TBBT* is not that Sheldon is autistic, but that he is a “mad” genius, a “nutso” nerd, or a “crazy” geek.

One popular line from the show that has made its way onto several memes and t-shirts is Sheldon’s varying and recurring versions of “I’m not insane...my mother had me tested” (see, e.g., “The Griffin Equivalency” [2.4]). The reason this is funny is not only because everyone, including viewers (and Sheldon’s fictional mother), think Sheldon is “crazy,” but also because the joke pokes fun at the limits of *TBBT*’s precious science, which clearly missed the mark on diagnosing Sheldon while being revered by all the main characters on the show. At the same time, Sheldon is quite rightly telling everyone that he’s not really the crazy one – the so-called sane people are insane. The joke is on Sheldon, science, the viewer, definitions of normal, and assumptions about craziness and madness. In fact, it could be argued that all lead characters who are academics or researchers display some form of “mad genius,” diagnosed disability, or ambiguous impairment; even Penny could be included, despite her lack of an advanced degree or position in higher education (see examples in Table 1). These range from vague disorders like Sheldon’s skin conditions (which are discussed and thoroughly medicated by Sheldon but never seen), to conditions that are not currently defined as disabilities in society; they only become impairments on the show when characters refuse to acknowledge them or accept support for them (like Raj’s supposedly “repressed homosexuality,” Bernadette’s short-fused temper or egomania, or Howard’s dysfunctional relationship with his mother). Some are diagnosed and viewers have seen characters seeking medical options to treat them, like Raj’s social anxiety or Howard’s severe allergies. If mental illness, impairment, sickness, or deformity (even without an official label or diagnosis) can be identified as disability (Titchkosky, 2009), then all the professors and researchers on *TBBT* are disabled.

Table 1. Main characters on *The Big Bang Theory* and explicit or implied disabilities, illnesses or ambiguous impairments.

<u>Character</u>	<u>Examples of Disabilities, Conditions, Illnesses, and Ambiguous Impairments</u>
Raj Koothrappali	Selective mutism around women (resolved by Season 7), which evolved from urinary incontinence and mutism. Social anxiety. Unacknowledged gay desires and traits defined as traditionally feminine.
Leonard Hofstadter	Lactose intolerance, extreme myopia corrected with lenses, asthma, carsickness, skin sensitivities, genetic heart disease.
Bernadette Rostenkowski	Very short. High-pitched voice. Temper that flares and resolves quickly; hyperaggressive (especially in competitions), with occasional bouts of mania and egomaniacal behavior. Questionable ethics, behaviors, and lackadaisical attitudes about the infectious disease specimens she and her colleagues handle.
Penny	Struggles with managing temper, insecure, easily addicted to anything from wine to videogames. Seems to be “catching” geekiness from others over the course of the series. Some characters refer to her as being pathologically messy, disorganized, and inattentive to details. Implied possible complications from mother smoking pot while pregnant and father raising her like a boy.
Amy Farah Fowler	OCD and autistic traits, seems obsessed with female-to-female and kinkier forms of sex. Originally resists social norms and dating, but eventually forms friendships and embraces social life.
Sheldon Cooper	Extremely high IQ. OCD and autistic traits: little to no interest in sex, difficulty with social norms, patterned behavior with difficulty varying from schedule. Hypochondriac about minor symptoms. Various undefined skin conditions. Frequently called crazy.
Howard Wolowitz	Hypersexual but afraid of women for first four seasons. Inferiority complexes about height, skills as a husband, and not having a doctorate. Complex relationship with mother that has been called pathological. Multiple allergies, including peanuts. Asthma and congenital heart condition. Language savant (polyglot).

Even minor roles of academics on *TBBT* portray professors and researchers on campuses as geniuses who are also insane. Colleagues of the lead characters are nearly always portrayed as being on the verge of a psychotic break (i.e., usually described as a “nervous breakdown”), unable to see all the quirks and foibles of the main characters because they are so common in higher education or science fields, explicitly disabled (like the researcher Kripke with a speech impediment), egomaniacs (or overly dramatic divas), antisocial, or actually physically and visibly disabled (as in the case of Stephen Hawking in a guest role). Although *TBBT* primarily shows academics from science, math and technological fields, even non-scientists at Caltech, like humanities professors who meet Raj and Sheldon at a faculty mixer (“The Psychic Vortex” (3.12)), are still portrayed as geeks (in this case by rocking out with an Xbox and appreciating Green Lantern collectibles).

The only “sane” or “normal” colleagues are usually college administrators like the Dean, who even temporarily fires Sheldon when he accuses the Dean of dumbing down his scientific work (“The Luminous Fish Effect” (1.4)). There are several running jokes about the president of the university putting up with Sheldon as he attempts to solicit donations, participate in public relations campaigns, and follow university policies like taking vacation time.

Students are typically portrayed as sane and normal, usually just barely tolerating professors, who naturally fail to understand students’ perceptions of them. In season four’s “The Thespian Catalyst” (4.14), Sheldon guest lectures for a doctoral seminar in physics. Students tweet that “Dr. Cooper has taken a relatively boring topic and managed to make it completely insufferable. Plus he looks like an insect.” Another asks why time flies when you’re having fun, “but when you’re listening to Dr. Cooper, it falls out of the sky dead?” In an interesting twist, the mad geniuses can even drive students insane, with one student saying that “...Dr. Cooper has made me wanna start cutting myself again.” Yet Sheldon tells his friends that the lecture was “triumphant,” with students “thirsty for knowledge, drinking in my wisdom” and that he “may have changed a few lives.” When Sheldon reads the comments he says they are “rather unfair” and “downright cruel.” “Plus,” he notes, “insects have six legs.” He goes to his room, remarking that he “didn’t want to teach those poopy heads anyway,” simultaneously dismissing and insulting the students, having an immature tantrum that reinforces students as more mature, and maintaining his status as a genius defining reality in his own delusional but defiant way.

Thus in this fictional portrayal of higher education, these disabilities, impairments, quirks, and even craziness are par for the course among all faculty and researchers – especially those in the STEM fields. Yet part of the humor on *TBBT* is the way it repeatedly forces viewers to question their assumptions about those who seem normal and who is impaired. “Normal” can even be something meriting caution or scorn, while “crazy” ones may be healthy, understanding things most people cannot perceive.

In the second season (“The Bath Gift Hypothesis” [2.11]), the character of Dr. David Underhill is a visiting research physicist in the first season is a MacArthur Genius Award winner who discovers new theories about dark matter; he is an epitome of dark rugged handsomeness and masculinity, riding motorcycles and suavely seducing Penny. Leonard derides this scientist as “a Beauty Queen” who “got lucky.” The “sane” genius is revealed as actually being evil and cruel, heartlessly dumping Penny, who then runs to geeky Leonard for consolation. In another episode, a 15-year old Asian Sheldon-like genius shows up to become a researcher at Caltech,

but gives it up to hang out with girls and teenage peers. Leonard feels guilty for showing him the existence of females and a different life, but Sheldon makes it clear that the boy had a choice and was obviously not genius enough if he chose normality and sex over a life of science and research (“The Jerusalem Duality” [1.12]).

Disability studies scholar Walters (2013), who wrote about autism-related themes and characters in television shows *The Big Bang Theory* and *Community*, speaks favorably about the humor in both series, which also happen to be the only two television series in 2014 that are about higher education:

“Comedies such as *The Big Bang Theory* and *Community* demonstrate [these] characters . . . as essential to social cohesion, and even work to resist the assumption that cognitive difference separates . . . characters into categories of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal.’ The comic frames of comedies such as these crack the frames of typical instances of disability humor and invent new ways of understanding cognitive differences” (p. 274).

Her comments apply to madness as well as autism, with the show setting up a new cultural media trope of neurodiverse disabled “mad geniuses” as researchers and professors in higher education. While *TBBT* revolves around the apartment of Leonard and Sheldon and was originally designed to be a show about geeks in the normal world, it is clear that their careers infuse their homes and social lives, as well as their interactions with others. The humor for the audience is in recognizing a shared experience or situation (e.g., a fight with a girlfriend), but having it in esoteric science jargon that is sometimes unintelligible even to other characters on the show.

In the second show of the second season (“The Codpiece Typology” [2.2]), Leonard’s girlfriend, Leslie Winkle, argues with Sheldon and is outraged that Leonard won’t stand up for her. While anyone can understand and empathize with the situation, the language is typical science-speak from *TBBT*:

Sheldon (entering living room of apartment where Leonard and Leslie are sitting):
Leonard, you are my friend. And friends support their friends, apparently. So I am withdrawing my objection to your desire to have a relationship with Leslie.

Leonard (to Sheldon): Thank you.

Sheldon: I will graciously overlook the fact that she is an arrogant sub-par scientist, who actually believes loop quantum gravity better unites quantum mechanics with general relativity than does string theory. You kids have fun.

Leslie (to Sheldon): Hang on a second. Loop quantum gravity clearly offers more testable predictions than string theory.

Sheldon: I’m listening. Amuse me.

Leslie: Okay, well, for one thing we expect quanti-space time to manifest itself as minute differences in the speed of light for different colors.

Sheldon: Balderdash. Matter clearly consists of tiny strings.

Leslie (yelling at Leonard): Are you going to let him talk to me like that?

Just as their conversations may be framed as “normal” and “not normal” at the same time, characters’ interactions with each other and their fictional TV community are similarly academic while being relatable to non-academics. The group of researchers hangs out with other geniuses from higher education, whether they are at the comic book store (run by a genius in art who has a degree from the Rhode Island School of Design), or at a paintball competition (where fierce competitors from the geography department use their advanced GPS to defeat colleagues). But eating Chinese food, knowing local small business owners in the neighborhood, or getting competitive with friends and work colleagues are universally understood for viewers in the U.S.

The question for disability scholars is how to deconstruct the humor of *TBBT* and this televised modern version of the academic geeky intelligent “mad geniuses” that are obviously proving popular with mainstream audiences. What implications may they have for disability studies, higher education, and society? For that, I turn to freak show theories and commentary to explain the freak show of *TBBT* as a series, and the freak show of academia as portrayed on the show.

The Freak Show of Higher Education

The complex connections between freaks, geeks, genius, and madness are not unique to the character of Sheldon or other lead characters in *TBBT*. Nerds, geeks, OCD or obsessiveness, and Asperger’s or autism traits are often linked together in the minds of popular culture, the neurodiversity movement, and science research – even when these three groups traditionally agree on little else (Bednarek, 2012; Cefalu, 2009). *TBBT* and the character of Sheldon can be interpreted through disability studies, even though the field has traditionally dealt more with issues of physical embodiment and body criticism, instead of neurodiversity and cognitive freakishness (for examples and critiques, see e.g., Adams, 2001; Bogdan, 1990; Fiedler, 1993; Garland Thomson, 2000; Price, 2011; Wu, 2012).

Since the 1980’s, numerous disability scholars have remarked on the negative portrayals, stereotypes, and tropes of disability in film and television. Disability is often associated with monsters who wreak havoc, murder, terror, and violence (Bogdan, et al., 1982) and it’s quite common for criminals, villains, or general “bad guys” to be easily recognizable by their hunchbacks, grotesque features, or other physical abnormalities, as well as their bitterness or insanity at their lot (rather than their ability to overcome their fate) (Longmore, 1985; Walters, 2013). Sometimes the monsters, like vampires, are even scarier because they look just like us but are eventually shown as the evil freak they really are (McDermott & Daspit, 2005). Disability can also be a “narrative prosthesis” or metaphor representing oddness, collapse, abnormality, or decay (Leuschner, 2006; Walters, 2013). Modern reality TV shows like *Little People*, *Big World* or *Ruby* may even display people with disabilities as freaks, replacing the side

shows of yesterday with more relatable characters and socio-political views of some disabilities, while still giving viewers an opportunity to stare and feel normal (Backstrom, 2012). In fact, despite the many variations in its manifestations, disability in pop culture, film, and literature is ultimately about reproducing, verifying, and justifying all that is normal, sane, and good, because the freak, monster, or deformed humans are compared (and judged) against standards and stereotypes about what is normal in our culture (Titchkosky, 2009).

There is also a close connection between geeks and freaks, particularly in connection with the history of freak shows. In Jon Katz's book *Geeks*, he notes the Merriam-Webster Dictionary's definitions of geeks includes "a person often of an intellectual bent who is disapproved of," with an alternative definition of geek as "a carnival performer often billed as a wild man whose act usually includes biting the head off a live chicken or snake" (p. 5). Katz wryly notes that "definitions involving chicken heads no longer apply" to discussions of geeks (p. 6), but from a disability studies perspective, the historical connection between overlapping worlds of freaks, geeks, and intellectuals is worth noting when Sheldon and other characters on *The Big Bang Theory* so clearly personify all three.

Sheldon and his friends are often described as geeks, and they readily accept and embrace the label. Geeks are usually pasty (and Caucasian), skinny, weak nerds with a near-savant abilities with anything technological. They even relate to others primarily through networks like the Internet or online gaming. Like freaks, they don't have a single culture, but they do have communities and strong connections with each other, and value diverse skills and a responsibility of using those skills for the benefit of humankind. (For further definitions of geeks, see, e.g., Katz, 2000; Kelty, 2005; Postrel, 2010; Quail, 2011; & McFedries, 2008). *TBBT* main characters fit the definition of geek and, as discussed above, they are all mad or disabled to some degree.

This perception of all geniuses as mad is consistent with historical beliefs about mad geniuses, originating in the early 1800's. In his 1978 text *The Mad Genius Controversy: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance*, George Becker analyzed historical interpretations of mad geniuses, showing that essentially only extremely gifted and original thinkers could be gifted enough to be insane. During the Romantic era (end of the 18th century through the mid-19th century), artists, scientists, and writers of genius would even try to associate with clinical madness, testifying to the "marginality" of one's "mental health" and the "frequent deterioration in his mental and physical condition" (p. 64). In other words, the illness proved evidence of the genius. Depending on the viewer's perspective, a mad genius was either "an agent of change and revolution" (p. 109) or "a blessing" and "agent of progress" (p. 111). The difference was dependent on who did the viewing. Becker suggests there was common agreement that geniuses were not normal. If the mind of a genius was not allowed to express itself, be original, and to challenge existing conventions and institutions, then, driven by instincts inherent to genius, it could result in undesirable behaviors, ranging from obscenities and agitation to strange writing and obsession with "minuteness in detail" (p. 112). Some felt that mad geniuses were part of the natural order, and an important part of social change; their contributions to society were to be valued and any seemingly abnormal behaviors tolerated or even celebrated. But others suggested that doctors, psychiatrists, and cultivated educated persons should take over where the criminal justice system could not, imposing social control on those geniuses who showed signs of madness. Indeed, even in 1978, Becker notes "social control considerations constitute an

integral part in the labeling of madness, and, indeed, have figured prominently in the very development of the mental health movement.” (p. 119). Becker’s words are especially chilling in the current climate of U.S. higher education mental health movements, where professionals seek ways to find potentially violent intelligent students and faculty exhibiting any signs of insanity or emotional instability. Indeed, Schumer (2006) noted that historical literary representations of mad scientists and mad geniuses continue to influence the general public’s opinion of science. And even medical professionals and psychiatrists have continued to explore possible biological or genetic connections between various types of mental illness and genius (see, e.g., Johnson, Murray, Fredrickson, Youngstrom, Hinshaw, Malbrancq, Bass, Deckersbach, Schooler, & Salloum, 2012; Redfield Jamison, 1993; Weisburg, 1994).

The lead characters of *TBBT* clearly fit Becker’s complex portrait of mad geniuses, driven by their own ultra-intelligent compulsions, free of social conventions, and driven to do original work. Like their Romantic counterparts, Sheldon and his colleagues embrace their “craziness” and intelligence as being intertwined gifts that others may not understand, knowing others may even see them as pathologically different. Borrowing from cultures of freaks and geeks, *TBBT* characters honor each other’s gifts and only use their intellect, scientific knowledge, and technological prowess for good (Katz, 2000; Postrel, 2010), although Sheldon once pondered the fact that many evil villains seem to have doctorates (and his friends have remarked that he is “one lab accident away” from being an evil super villain himself). Even with its casual and frequently ableist banter about neurodiversity and intellectual difference, people put down as “morons” or “stupid” frequently get their chance to show how so-called moronic or stupid the geniuses can be. Penny, Sheldon’s religiously zealous mother, Sheldon’s beautiful but “stupid” sister, and administrators at Caltech are given ample opportunity to outsmart the scientists, show the limitations of their logic and devotion to science, or exercise power over them (sometimes manipulating them by using their own intelligence against them).

The most famous actor to portray mad geniuses was Boris Karloff, whose characters included mad scientists who were blind or wheelchair users, doing evil experiments that put humans at risk (Bogdan et al., 1982). In a more modern take on the role, genius often accompanies OCD or more generic forms of obsession, like Sheldon in *TBBT* or the lead character of television’s series *Monk* who had a label of OCD. These mad geniuses are usually the butt of jokes in sitcoms, where humor and comedy are used to challenge their intelligence, ego, or assumed superiority (Cefalu, 2009). They are often given “childlike” reflexes, an ignorance about their own limitations, and a supposedly comical hyper-awareness of obsessive rituals as problematic but unavoidable (Cefalu, 2009). The comedy comes from them simultaneously not being able to change the limitations they notice, and not realizing how extensive the limitations are (Cefalu, 2009).

Table 2 draws upon works on freaks, geeks, and the “mad genius” scientists featured in *TBBT*, using criteria for each group as defined by Adams (2001), Becker (1978), Bogdan (1988), Bogdan et al. (1982), Fiedler (1993), Garland Thomson (2000), Katz (2000), McFedries (2008), Quail (2011), and Walters (2013). First, the freak show relationship is framed as a triad: the freak/object being viewed; the audience or those doing the viewing; mediators setting up the object and way in which it is viewed, which is traditionally the carny; and (Garland Thomson, 2000). Second, for each to be effective as a freak, the groups have societal or cultural ideals that

are challenged or reinforced by the group's existence. In the case of *TBBT* researchers, societal ideals, normality, and the supposedly normal television viewers are the brunt of the joke (Walters, 2013), whereas freaks and geeks are often portrayed in ways that reiterate the status quo of their freakishness and the viewers' normality, healthiness, and beauty. Third, each group has rituals, ceremonies, props, language and jargon to not only signify who is an insider or outsider, but to solidify community, norms, and the boundaries of the group. As Adams describes, "freak is not an inherent quality, but an identity realized through gesture, costume, and staging" (2001). Lastly, each has a domain where the freak show occurs, from stage shows to the Internet, or science labs.

Table 2. Comparison of freaks, geeks, mad geniuses, and characters on *The Big Bang Theory*, based on descriptions of each group in Adams (2001), Becker (1978), Bogdan (1988), Bogdan et al. (1982), Fiedler (1993), Garland Thomson (2000), Katz (2000), McFedries (2008), Quail (2011), and Walters (2013).

<u>Freak Show Traits</u>	<u>Freaks</u>	<u>Geeks</u>	<u>Mad Geniuses/ Mad Scientists</u>	<u><i>The Big Bang Theory's</i> Geeky "Mad Geniuses" Freaks</u>
Object/viewer/mediator triad	Freak/spectator/carnie or ringmaster	Geek/suits, non-geeks, or non-techies/Internet	Extreme intelligence that is potentially dangerous/people of normal intelligence/the monsters, evil, or ill-conceived experiments showing their madness	Genius researchers and professors/television audience/sitcom format, <i>TBBT</i> writers and producers
Ideal challenged or reinforced by group	Beauty, normality	Anti-intellectualism, neurotypical cognition, social convention, nerd vs. cool or hip, athleticism	Science, evolution, technology	Difference, normality, intelligence
Rituals, ceremonies, icons, staging, props, and discourse	Examples: language of "carnies" and "rubes," pageantry and showmanship of sideshows, costumes and spectacles (like marriages of little people for show)	Examples: pocket protectors, sickly or weak appearance, skills with technology, jargon-speak, obsession with	Examples: Lab equipment, books, evil laughter, esoteric science jargon, separateness and alienation from normal people (e.g., the tower on	Examples: lack of social skills, out-of-fashion or geeky attire, use of science and pop culture references to explain daily social interactions, appearance of work

		pop culture, social interaction mediated by technology and Internet	the hill away from the villagers), lack of ethics in the name of scientific progress	items and language at home (and vice versa), abnormal sexual behavior, habits revolving around science fiction, gaming, and comics, reverence for all things related to hard sciences and technology
Inhabited domains	Visual mediums, including stage, photography, reality television	The Internet; any obsession (e.g., music geek, gaming geek, crafty geek)	The science lab, technology	Higher education; technology; geeky activities like comics, gaming, and paintball; on a literal level, the sitcom format of <i>TBBT</i>

In the case of *TBBT*, it is particularly interesting to note two levels of freak shows. In one case, the viewer is *TBBT* audiences, watching a fictional freak show involving Sheldon and others. The second freak show is the fictionalized world of higher education inhabited by Sheldon and other lead characters. In this world, Sheldon and other academics are portrayed as freaks that are only normalized by being in an academic environment where their personality, cognitive, and physical traits are typical or tolerated for the sake of their work. This is consistent with observations by Bogdan (1988), who observed that freak shows were often set up like human service agencies, with “presentation and profit” by nondisabled people being in the forefront, while real disabled people were behind the scenes (p. 279). In the case of *TBBT*, disabled academics do the work, while institutions of higher education run by seemingly nondisabled administrators profit from their labor.

TBBT's humor about the freakdom of geeks, mad geniuses, and academia are often less than nuanced and they frequently problematic for disability scholars. *TBBT* may be contributing to the emergence of “geek chic” (Quail, 2011, pp. 466-467), but its humor often relies on oppressive racial, gendered, and sexual norms about geeks for the jokes to be funny, just as nerd or geek identity is often created in response to oppressive societal ideals of hip, cool, normal, masculinity, or corporate (Quail, 2011). For example, *TBBT* may have Raj, an Indian geek with brown skin, but the rest of the scientists and researchers follow sociocultural constructions of geeks who tend to be pasty white, educated, and middle-class enough to afford the technology that forms a foundation for their community (Quail, 2011). There is also no question that the “mad genius” of *TBBT* scientists alludes to stereotypes in place since Dr. Frankenstein of the 1800's. Even as the geniuses are now working out of apartments in California, in many ways they are still metaphorically holed up with eccentric assistants (or colleagues) in an Ivory Tower, using science that may be advanced, but is also unintelligible and bordering on dangerous (Becker, 1978).

The issue of madness, OCD, or mental disability being connected to genius and academia is also troublesome for the way society views cognitive neurodiversity, including intellectual disabilities, mental disabilities or mental illnesses, and those with dyslexia or brain injuries (Price, 2011; Becker, 1978). On *TBBT*, characters frequently use the terms “idiot,” “moron,” or “stupid” as socially acceptable epithets that don’t bear further scrutiny or criticism. People with seemingly average intellect (like Penny) are portrayed as hopelessly stupid at times, and people with intellectual disabilities have never appeared on the show; for all intents and purposes, this entire population is non-existent in *TBBT*’s universe.

Other disabilities are also fodder for jokes, even when characters get in trouble for it. When Raj dated a Deaf woman and his friends suspected she was after his money, Penny remarked that it couldn’t be true because “handicapped people are always nice” (although it was, in fact, completely true) (“The Wiggly Finger Catalyst” [5.4]). When dating, Raj and Howard would often count on lawyers and accountants to “thin the herd” at bars, hoping to pick up the “blind and fat chicks” left over. The joke was that the two guys never actually left with any women, including the disabled ones, so the disabled women apparently had higher standards or social standing than the men suspected. There are frequent references to Howard’s mother being fat, mimicking of Stephen Hawking’s computerized voice, and jokes about other disabilities that come up on the show. Like the rest of *TBBT* humor, it walks a fine line between offensive and transformative, offending people, allowing characters to get in trouble for their comments or beliefs later, but then re-offending to start the cycle again. It relies on dated beliefs and language about disability, while simultaneously allowing the lead characters to have disabilities that are progressively accommodated without question. This framework of incongruity takes the different or “out of place” and transforms it, making it more dynamic or deliberately contradicting it both conservative and progressive viewers are uncertain what is really appropriate, normal, different or out of place after all (Walters, 2013, p. 272). And with the evolving nature of *TBBT* characters, everyone is allowed to learn from their mistakes. By its nature, television shows are intimate, with interactions between characters and interactions between characters and the audience, as viewers “meet” characters in their homes and grow with them over time (Bednarek, 2012). The subtleties of *TBBT* may resonate with viewers who worry about offending someone or being politically incorrect in a complex multicultural society.

Indeed, *TBBT* may be viewed as crippling the concept of “spread effect,” a term from psychology and rehabilitation that describes how a single disability or perceived disability can eclipse all other characteristics of a person in a negative way (e.g., assuming a physical disability indicates a lack of intelligence) (as originally developed by Dumbo, Leviton, & Wright, 1956 and Wright, 1983). But instead of difference or disability “spreading” and negatively stigmatizing every aspect of characters (for discussion, see, e.g., Longmore, 1985), the disabilities, impairments, and differences in *TBBT* are a part of each character, evolving and affecting each other’s development, with the “spread effect” being interpersonal and frequently positive. As it moves into its seventh season, viewers have seen Sheldon pull together an awkward hug and a couple of kisses for Amy, Howard has grown up a bit as a married man, Penny has found her inner geek on occasion and tried college again, Leonard seems to be sustaining his relationship with Penny (possibly into marriage), and Raj is now able to speak in front of women.

There is a myth in geek folklore that says the Internet is so dynamic and ever-changing that it has decentralized routing protocols that can withstand any damage, including a nuclear attack; if anyone tries to limit or censor the Internet it will be perceived as damage, and the tech will route around it (Kelty, 2005). Like this myth, it seems *TBBT* has evolved to “route around” any efforts to normalize it; the producers have quickly realized that the most alienated character of Sheldon is the most beloved, that adding more science only enhances the show, and that a reverence for geekdom is a secret to success with audiences despite a U.S. climate of pervasive anti-intellectualism that often features resentment against academics (Cross, 2005; Leuschner, 2006; Postrel, 2010; Sheffield, 2010; Tucker, 2010). If *TBBT* characters are a complex new generation of geeky disabled mad geniuses, re-interpreting and frequently crippling stereotypes of freaks, geeks, and madness, as well as impairment, disability, and difference, then the next logical question is what the *TBBT*’s portrayal of academics and the freak show of higher education may teach society about higher education and disability.

The Perpetual Spotlights of the Academic Freak Show

Margaret Price wrote *Mad at School* (Price, 2011), a critique of higher education concepts like rationality through a disability studies lens rooted in rhetoric related to mental disabilities, mental health, and mental illness. She further examines requirements of faculty and students in academia, including what she calls “kairotic space,” the informal, implicit, and usually unnoticed spaces of higher education where knowledge and power are created and reinforced (Price, 2011, p. 60). Her examples include interactions in hallways, at meetings, during conferences, and even supposedly informal events like parties or other social events for faculty and students.

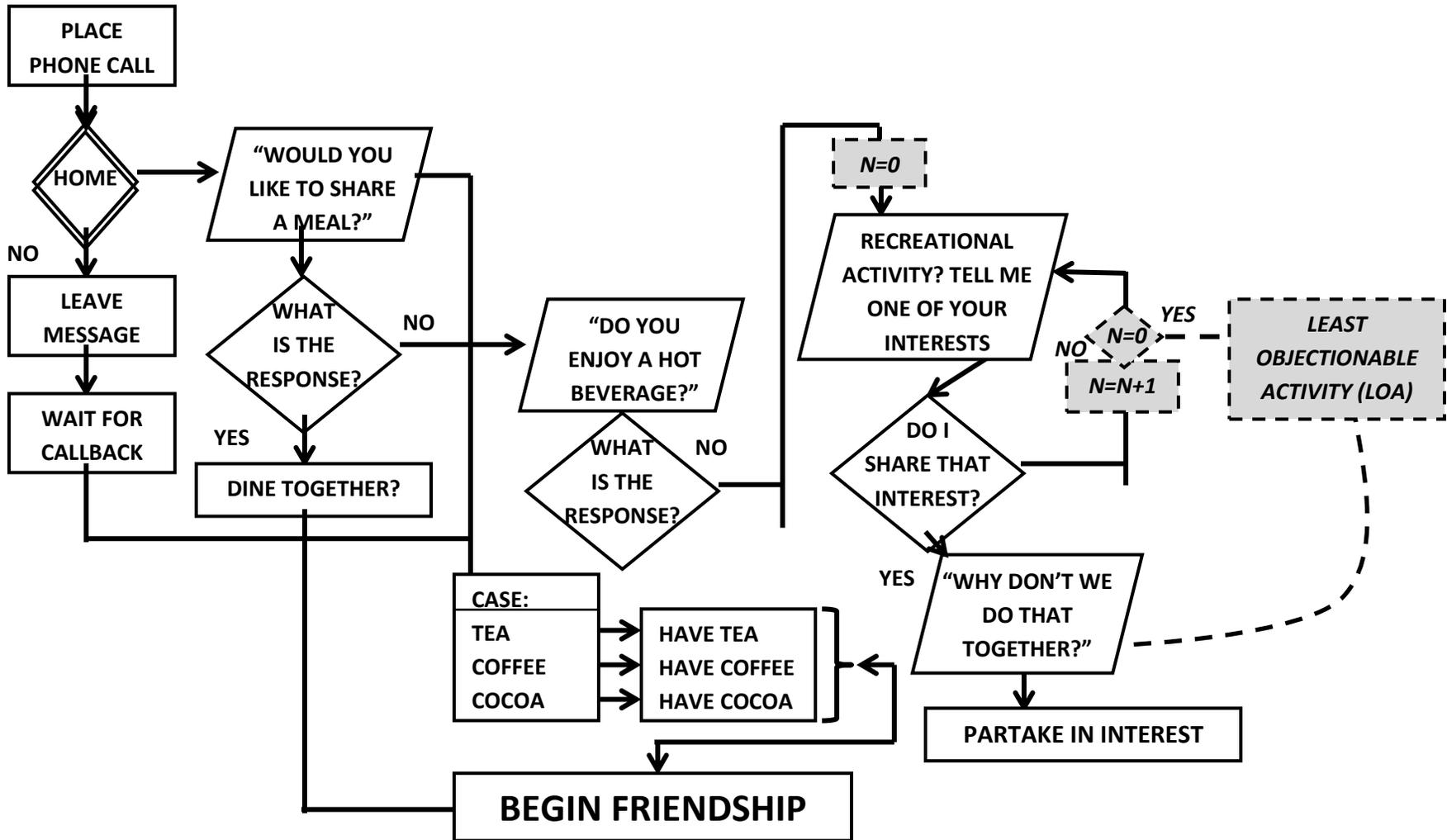
TBBT rarely shows researchers trying to teach anything or engage in any sort of mentoring, pedagogical work, or efforts to improve their teaching. Instead, nearly every episode is about their social interactions, sex, dating, hobbies, and a steady diet of take-out food. Yet this fictionalized account of academic life aligns with the real world of academics and Price’s definition of kairotic space, where distinctions between work, home, and relationships are blurred. There are white boards full of theorems in *TBBT* living rooms, paintball games against professorial foes from other academic departments, carpooling games like ranking famous scientists, and the use of logic and research to make sense of illogical social norms. There is rarely a time when any of the scholars on *TBBT* “turn off” any part of their mad genius. They aren’t only “mad geniuses” at work, or *TBBT* would take place on campus. The characters are mad geniuses all the time – that’s why it’s entertaining, why it resonates with real scientists and professors, and why they’re mad.

The lives of academics are portrayed as a 24-hour, 7-days-a-week role – a freak show with spotlights that shine continuously at home, work, and in the community. *TBBT* builds this idea of a perpetual freak show through the characters being disabled, the characters being in the literal spotlight of a television series, and through the content and plot lines reiterating the unchanging message of non-stop academic life, geekiness, and mad genius to viewers (despite evolutions in other aspects of the characters’ lives). Here Price’s work and *TBBT* converge: if academics are mad genius geeky freaks, and higher education is the freak show where they

perform; the kairotic space of academia means they are never really out of the spotlight or their role as freaks.

The way characters accommodate each other is very similar to relationships of freak show performers, as well. Sideshow freaks and geeks supported each other and formed a family or community that often existed even after they retired (Adams, 2001; Bogdan, 1988). The academic characters on *TBBT* have a similarly close bond, forged in their experiences of being different (all of them, for example, have mentioned experiences being bullied as children). They also frequently accommodate each other by negotiating in the moment as peers, doing what many professionals in disability-related fields call “natural supports.” Unlike real-life academics with disabilities, the main characters are never isolated (except by choice), and they do not need to seek out a disability services office to get accommodations. Many episodes feature the group trying to figure out simple things like how to attend the Renaissance Fair or a movie while accommodating all of the group’s complex needs, with the needs of Sheldon often being the most complex and therefore the most challenging to negotiate. When Sheldon becomes sick, for example, the friends implement a formal protocol for dealing with him (or avoiding him) and for also supporting Leonard as Sheldon’s roommate (“The Pancake Batter Anomaly” [1.11]). In “The Friendship Algorithm” (2.13), Sheldon uses a children’s how-to-make friends book about Stu the Cockatoo (who was new at the zoo) to create a flow-chart algorithm for making friends (see Figure 1). It begins with “Place Phone Call,” and ends with “Begin Friendship” or “Partake in Interest” options, using logic decision trees like “Do You Enjoy a Hot Beverage?” where “Yes” leads to suggestions of having tea, coffee, or cocoa, and “No” leads to suggesting a recreational activity. Sheldon gets stuck in an infinite loop when he objects to all possible activities potential friend Kripke is suggesting. Howard solves the problem by fixing the chart with a loop counter and an escape to the least objectionable activity. He fixes the problem by adjusting the chart, not by assuming it will not work for Sheldon or that Sheldon is incapable of friendship. Sheldon is then able to move forward with the least objectionable activity, and planning a day out with a potential new friend.

Figure 1. Sheldon Cooper’s algorithm for making friends, from “The Friendship Algorithm” (2.13), with grey boxes indicating Howard’s loop counter and an escape to the least objectionable activity.



But while Sheldon's need for supports and assistance could become a troubling punch line if it was always one way, he is not the only one who needs them. *TBBT* has shown viewers the extent to which Sheldon sometimes accommodates his friends and colleagues, even if others do not notice it. When his three male friends head for Vegas, Sheldon delights in plans for a quiet evening at home with non-Kosher Indian food full of dairy, noting that the absence of Jewish Howard, Indian friend Raj who hates Indian food, and lactose intolerant Leonard have freed him up to do as he wishes ("The Vegas Renormalization" [2.21]). Until that time, it wasn't clear to viewers or other characters that Sheldon's complex schedules and timetables for meals might be considering his friends' needs and wishes, as well as his own.

Sometimes the supports and accommodations become the central focus or running gag within an episode. When Raj dated a Deaf woman, he was not mute and could talk to her (because she could never hear him). But polyglot Howard had to interpret communications into ASL, and Raj had to learn limited sign language, leading to several humorous situations when Howard was distracted, preoccupied, or figuring out so-called better ways to phrase things, and not interpreting everything accurately or completely ("The Wiggly Finger Catalyst" [5.4]).

This particular aspect of *TBBT* is consistent with progressive disability politics, which seek ways to adjust the environment rather than forcing the disabled person to overcome a disability, hide it, or adjust to an environment that creates impairment. Indeed, for many disabled academics and students, *TBBT* represents a sort of universally designed utopia where accommodations may occur without typical formal arrangements, inconveniences, justifications, concerns about costs, approval letters from professionals, and disability documentation usually involved in getting the most basic of services. All the main characters "speak the same language and respect each others' boundaries" (Sheffield, 2010, p. 26). When things aren't perfect, everyone tries to work through it together. *TBBT* characters might be teased by others, but there will always be something to tease back about, too. Academics (especially scientists) with disabilities are taken seriously for their work, because none of them look good, they are all intelligent, and all of them are disabled in some way; their disabilities are not a way to distinguish them from other academics. Even the viewer is also metaphorically disabled upon entering their world, needing accommodations just to understand much of the science jargon – Penny frequently stands in for the viewer as the "disabled" one who misses science fiction, comic, academic, or science references, puzzling that the academics are so clueless about "American Idol" or keeping up to date with the social lives of Hollywood stars. But even Penny needs accommodations, adjustments, and assistive technologies to succeed and thrive (the men are her live tech support, and the women often act as her interpreters, explaining jokes or jargon, and offering advice). Indeed, all of the accommodations on *TBBT* are perpetual and organic, and there is no expectation that the accommodations will cease or fade out (a common professional euphemism for gradually removing people's accommodations in the seemingly hope that they will become unnecessary, regardless of what disabled individuals may want or need).

When people are not acting like their usual selves on *TBBT*, others may remark that it's too weird, creepy, or even crazy when they are acting "normal." In "The Itchy Brain Simulation" (7.8), Sheldon at one point promises to "not freak out" when Leonard discovers an overdue videotape due seven years before. Sheldon actually doesn't freak out, and Penny has to

leave the room because she can't stand to watch Sheldon reacting calmly to something that would normally upset him; acting normal is freaky, and freaky is normal.

At the same time, the constant supporting and accommodating again reinforce Price's notion of kairotic spaces. *TBBT* characters accommodate mad genius academics on campus or at home, because they are always acting out of their primary identification as a scientist or researcher. But this never-ending academic existence and dedication to one's field is problematic for real-life faculty with disabilities, who are trying to negotiate tenure processes, high-speed publish-or-perish mentalities, and political hierarchies of campuses. In reality, academia is not a welcoming place for most graduate students and instructors with disabilities, and many feel the need to hide their disabilities (or aspects of their disabilities) while negotiating for every accommodation (Bell, 2007; Franke, Bérubé, O'Neill, & Kurland, 2012; Hockman, 2010; Solis, 2009; Valle, Solis, Volpitta, & Connor, 2004; Vance, 2007; White, 2008). In fact, 75 percent of campus disability services offices are set up to serve students, but not faculty or staff (Fuecker & Harbour, 2011; Harbour, 2004). For real-life disabled academic freaks or those who actually carry a disability label associated with "madness," *TBBT*'s messages might be familiar, funny, and oppressive, all at the same time: you are indeed a freak, administrators and students will most likely think you're abnormal, the only accommodations will be the ones you get from other freaks/colleagues, and there will never be a break or respite from demands of your 24/7 academic life.

The humor with Sheldon and other *TBBT* characters resonates with many scientists and academics because they are wrestling with shared frustrations of publishing, research, administration, teaching, etc. But the humor sends complicated messages about links between intellectualism and madness, genius and geekiness, and being at the mercy of colleagues who are creative or tolerant enough to deal with the foibles of your disabilities or difference. In the real world of higher education, where all the professors do not have disabilities and the ones who do are marginalized for it, the progressive and entertaining humor of *TBBT* may seem wry and hollow (for further discussion of faculty with disabilities, see, e.g., Franke, et al., 2012; Fuecker & Harbour, 2011; Michalko, 2001; Vance, 2007; White, 2008).

Meanwhile, college students watching *TBBT* are learning explicit and implicit messages about their professors being extremely intelligent but also potential mad geniuses – especially those in the scientific fields. Nondisabled faculty may get a skewed picture of the disability experience in higher education, where ableism is minimized and disabled colleagues are part of a comedic spectrum of quirkiness in faculty. Disabled undergraduates and graduate students who dream of being researchers or professors learn that once you choose those careers, there is no escape from the spectacle of academic life. The only consolation, perhaps, is that you might be surrounded by people as freaky as you. The only way to survive the freak show is to support each other, embrace your freakiness, and ignore any illusions that normal ever existed in the first place – mixed messages indeed.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed how *TBBT*, especially the character of Sheldon, tests new boundaries and definitions for a modern version of the geeky mad genius, living in the non-stop

freak show of academic life. The show utilizes problematic, oppressive, and ableist societal norms and pop culture tropes to make Sheldon and his mad genius colleague relatable and familiar. At the same time, it questions, challenges, and contradicts these assumptions while allowing characters to evolve over time and accommodate each other's needs, providing a way for general audiences to begin thinking about neurodiversity and societally constructed definitions of normality.

Very little research has been done on disability and higher education, or images of disability and higher education in pop culture and the media. It would be valuable to examine other television shows and movies where higher education is utilized in some way, to see what themes and messages about disability are present. Previous research (e.g., Dagaz and Harger, 2011) have used social science methodology to examine whether images of higher education may affect college student behavior or attitudes; these could be replicated to consider images of disability in higher education, as well.

In addition, *TBBT* shows no signs of waning popularity. As it continues to garner critical acclaim, large audiences, and national awards, it is likely to stay on the air for quite some time. Disability scholars may wish to look at other facets of this show, including intersections between disability, race, gender, and other facets of characters. Likewise, this article focuses primarily on the researchers and academics of *TBBT*, but “non-academic” characters also portray disability or ambiguous impairments, and disability is a frequent comedic foil.

Until there is scholarship about various aspects of disability and higher education, disability in its many forms will continue to be invisible, underestimated, or even suppressed in academia (Anderson, 2006). Likewise, until connections are made between pop culture images of disability in higher education and experiences of people living and working on campuses, we will not fully understand how disability is constructed in postsecondary education, or how disability is fully experienced by disabled and nondisabled students, faculty, and staff. *TBBT* presents complicated narratives and messages about disability and higher education; disability studies and higher education scholars have an opportunity to interpret this in new directions, complementing and critiquing the humor in a way that befits our pride and power, as disabled people, geeks, mad geniuses, and freaks.

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