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Communication Deficiencies¹ Provide Incongruities for Humor: The Asperger's-like Case of *The Big Bang Theory*'s Sheldon Cooper

KAREN MCGRATH

Since 2007, CBS's *The Big Bang Theory* has captivated audiences who wait each week for "nerds" Sheldon Cooper, Leonard Hofstadter, Rajesh (Raj) Koothrapalli, and Howard Wolowitz to interact with Penny (and now also Bernadette and Amy) (Albiniak "Big Bang Begins"; Albiniak "Big Expectations"; Grego; Guthrie; Rickman). It is the quirkiness of their interactions that drive this comedy because it reminds us that communication is often funny when it is outside the expected social norms. While some may disagree, one presupposition of this paper is that much of the behavior in comedies is non-normative behavior which creates humor. For example, of the aforementioned characters, Sheldon is clearly the most outside the norm due to his communication difficulties in social situations and is often the "fish out of water" necessary for this sitcom (Smith 33). Leonard, Sheldon's physics colleague and roommate, actually teaches Sheldon how to be more socially appropriate. While Leonard is also a bit socially awkward, he is not always the "fish out of water" that Sheldon is and that Smith suggests is necessary for a good sitcom.

Howard is a Jewish engineer who lives with his mother until he marries Bernadette in season Five, and Raj is from India and has selective-mutism or "severe shyness or other social anxiety" when around women (Rickman 208). Penny is a struggling, promiscuous, actress from Omaha,

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Nebraska who works at The Cheesecake Factory and lives across the hall from Leonard and Sheldon. She and Sheldon are often at odds over the other's behaviors and their interactions provide fodder for the show as their "odd coupling" is often humorous (Smith 3). While all of the characters have their necessary idiosyncrasies, Sheldon is the focus here. Just as *Seinfeld* succeeded in making Kramer the "odd ball" to Jerry Seinfeld, so *The Big Bang Theory* succeeds with Sheldon and the others with whom he interacts. However, the difference is that Sheldon's behavior is often discussed by many Autism and Asperger's specialists and bloggers as Asperger's Syndrome, and many argue Sheldon is on the autism spectrum (Andraya; Collins; Keller; Patch; Sepinwall; Soraya). Therefore this article uses the characteristics of Asperger's to compare Sheldon's behaviors to assumed communicative norms and then addresses implications for pronouncing Sheldon "on the spectrum." However, the bases for humor need to be addressed forthwith.

Humor

Fodder, raw material derived from character interaction and difference used for comedies, is a necessity in sitcoms. Because Sheldon and Penny are apparent opposites, their beliefs, values, behaviors, etc. often conflict and provide humor. While other characters' behaviors and beliefs are also fodder, Sheldon is the focal point in this ensemble cast because his lack of both social acuity and social awareness (his communicative deficiencies) are most severe. Sheldon views himself as superior to everyone in his peer group because of his genius IQ; his identity and status in his peer group are clear to him, but differ from how others view him socially. For example, he tells Penny that Leonard is a "homunculus," calls Wolowitz "Mr." because he does not have a Ph.D., berates Penny for her lack of academic background and acting "success," and reminds Raj of his failures of being a good "Indian" (e.g., not liking Indian food).

Much of the humor in the show therefore arises from Sheldon assuming others have inferior intelligence thus making his own character's assumed superior intelligence and identity a premise for humor (humor studies' superiority theory). However, people who believe they are better than everyone else typically are not and in Sheldon's case his superior intelligence does not obscure his communication deficiencies, it emphasizes them for his friends and the viewers. Therefore, it is Sheldon's communication inferiority that viewers, and sometimes his friends, laugh at since his behavior in social interactions is incongruous with expected behavior in social situations (humor studies' incongruity theory). However, laughing at people's differences is key to successful comedies, even if it borders on the marginalization of those with diagnosed differences.

It is the prominence of these incongruities, these apparent "role reversals" Smith identifies as key to successful comedies and with which Sheldon is ill-equipped to deal, that assist in making this a successful comedy. Successful comedies are derived from the presence of humor theories in action² and the two aforementioned theories (superiority and incongruity) dominate the series. Smith notes how most jokes or funny situations are characterized by "incongruity . . . surprise . . . truth . . . aggression . . . brevity" such that tension is established, built, and released (11-16). And, he also notes that comedies often "write characters into a world where they don't belong, and you will end up with a mix of individuals who have dissimilar social skills, cultural traditions, educational backgrounds, religious points of view, intelligence levels, and even eating habits" (33). His key points clearly reflect the comedic formula for Sheldon and the others, and emphasize two dominant humor theories, especially incongruity theory. Although the male characters don't belong to assumed social normalcy for their age group, Sheldon is even more "abnormal" based on his assumed superiority to those around him, which provides much fodder for the comedy. Since incongruity is a basis

for the comedic process, and is present in this show, the presence of incongruity theory of humor is hereafter assumed in this analysis based on his communication deficiencies identified below.

Specifically, while humor studies have focused on a variety of comedies, peer-reviewed literature from 2007-2012 reveals that only two articles are directly related to an analysis of the show and its characters (Bednarek “Characterisation”; Hu). While many other researchers have studied TV shows in the past (e.g., Bednarek “Expressivity”; Quail), no study of this sitcom, or others, has its focus on communication differences as the incongruity necessary for humor in sitcoms or uses Asperger’s characteristics as an analytic framework; therefore, I do so here. The focus is on Sheldon Cooper, who is the self-claimed, smartest of the group, but whose lack of social prowess and acuity demonstrates that he is the least communicatively skilled, has the most to learn about social interactions, and is often the humor focal point. Below I use examples from seasons one through five, with specific focus on season one, episodes one and five; season two, episode five; and season three, episode eight to analyze how Sheldon’s communication “deficiencies” (differences) provide fodder for this comedy and use the Asperger’s characteristics to identify said deficiencies.

Briefly, and with no claims to professional or clinical expertise, Asperger’s is currently recognized by the American Psychological Association’s Diagnostic Statistics Manual as a disorder and, until recently, consisted of a separate diagnosis from autism (Falco). Beahm, and also Welton in an earlier work, suggest that Asperger’s is characterized by the following: social impairment, narrow interest, compulsive need for introducing routines and interests, speech and language peculiarities, nonverbal communication problems, and motor clumsiness (38). Clearly, these characteristics stand in contradistinction to assumed Western cultural, communicative norms thus Beahm’s and Welton’s observations about people with Asperger’s provide the analytic

framework below.³ In just a few episodes with Sheldon, the similarities are striking. Sheldon's Asperger's-like characteristics remind us that comedies often "offer a mix of individuals who have dissimilar social skills, cultural traditions, educational backgrounds, religious points of view, intelligence levels, and even eating habits," and this show is no exception (Smith 33).

Analysis⁴

As a reminder, Asperger's characteristics used here include: social impairment, narrow interest, compulsive need for introducing routines and interests, speech and language peculiarities, nonverbal communication problems, and motor clumsiness (Beahm; Welton). Analysis affirms that Sheldon exhibits these characteristics, which are the bases for comedy.

Social impairment, the most prominent of Sheldon's Asperger's-like characteristics, includes "extreme egocentricity" (Beahm 38), where knowledge of and adaptation to other people's beliefs, values, and behaviors or the social norms of the situation aren't pertinent. People exhibiting this characteristic may often "find being with a group stressful and confusing" and may also be perceived as "unfriendly" because they may "misunderstand what people are doing and why they are doing it" (Welton 22). From the first episode ("The Pilot"), Sheldon's social impairments are present when meeting Penny for the first time:

Penny: Oh, hi!

Leonard: Hi.

Sheldon: Hi.

Leonard: Hi.

Sheldon: Hi.

Penny: Hi?

Leonard: We don't mean to interrupt; we live across the hall.

Penny: Oh, that's nice.

Leonard: Oh... uh... no... we don't live together... um... we live together but in separate, heterosexual bedrooms.

Penny: Oh, okay. Well, guess I'm your new neighbor, Penny.

Leonard: Leonard, Sheldon.

Penny: Hi.

Leonard: Hi.

Sheldon: Hi.

Penny: Hi.

Leonard: Hi. Well, uh, oh, welcome to the building.

Penny: Thank you, maybe we can have coffee sometime.

Leonard: Oh, great.

Penny: Great.

Sheldon: Great.

Leonard: Great. Well, bye.

Penny: Bye.

Sheldon: Bye.

Leonard: Bye.

In this exchange we encounter Leonard and Sheldon both exhibiting some impairment in expressing a simple greeting, “Hello.” They watch her for a moment, and it is not until Penny sees them and says “Oh, Hi!” that they engage her. Both repeat the word twice and then Penny says it a second time as a question, “Hello?” This exchange is more repetitious than usual and is incongruous with our own experiences of a greeting. Two men seem not to be able to have a conversation with a woman and appear to be the “fish out of water” in this exchange (Smith). The same thing occurs upon saying “Great” when Leonard says it a second time, which also reminds viewers of the social awkwardness of this situation. However, in this scene, Sheldon says almost nothing. The brevity of his remarks in most of the exchange is surprising, which Smith suggests makes for funny situations. In fact, he only mimics Leonard’s and Penny’s utterances, and Leonard even tells Penny Sheldon’s name. Sheldon’s lack of verbal utterances is initially incongruous to our expectations because prior to seeing Penny, he was talking at length with Leonard about many topics while walking up to their apartment; this situation clearly makes Sheldon uncomfortable, and it is Leonard who suggests that they invite Penny to their apartment for lunch:

Leonard: Should we have invited her for lunch?

Sheldon: No. We’re going to start Season Two of *Battlestar Galactica*.

Leonard: We already watched the Season Two DVDs.

Sheldon: Not with commentary.

Leonard: I think we should be good neighbors, invite her over, make her feel welcome.

Sheldon: We never invited Louis-slash-Louise over.

Leonard: Well, then that was wrong of us. We need to widen our circle.

Sheldon: I have a very wide circle. I have 212 friends on MySpace.

Leonard: Yes, and you've never met one of them.

Sheldon: That's the beauty of it.

Leonard: I'm going to invite her over. We'll have a nice meal and chat.

Sheldon: Chat? We don't chat. At least not offline.

Leonard: Well it's not difficult, you just listen to what she says and then you say something appropriate in response.

Sheldon: To what end?

Leonard: Hi. Again.

Penny: Hi.

Sheldon: Hi.

Leonard: Hi.

Penny: Hi.

Leonard: Anyway, um. We brought home Indian food. And, um. I know that moving can be stressful, and I find that when I'm undergoing stress, that good food and company can have a comforting effect. Also, curry is a natural laxative, and I don't have to tell you that, uh, a clean colon is just one less thing to worry about.

Sheldon: Leonard, I'm not expert here, but I believe in the context of a luncheon invitation, you might want to skip the reference to bowel movements.

Penny: Oh, you're inviting me over to eat?

Leonard: Uh, yes.

Penny: Oh, that's so nice, I'd love to.

Leonard: Great. ("The Pilot")

Sheldon is obviously uncomfortable with Leonard's suggestion to invite Penny for lunch because they had plans to watch *Battlestar Galactica* and also because they had not extended a similar invitation to their previous neighbor. Sheldon clearly doesn't understand why this invitation needs to be extended to Penny and when Leonard says he will invite her to lunch and they'll "have a nice meal and chat" Sheldon replies, "Chat? We don't chat. At least not offline." Here Sheldon acknowledges that both he and Leonard don't typically converse with strangers except in online environments, which now makes the 212 MySpace friends reference funnier. While online activity is important to many people, most can also chat with others in person, so Sheldon's comment comes as a surprise to first time viewers. However, viewers also come to learn throughout the series that the truth of this statement is what makes many future interactions comedic.

Leonard continues the conversation and tells Sheldon it is easy to chat because they just say something appropriate after listening to what she has to say, thus offering him a communication rule for interaction. But, Sheldon is still confused by this when he says, “To what end?” Clearly, he does not view the invitation as a polite way to get to know your neighbor and instead believes that Leonard is doing this in order to increase his chances of “sleeping with” Penny (which he references several times in the episode) and as a way to avoid their planned afternoon. However, Leonard is not off to a good start with Penny because a simple invite such as “Would you like to eat lunch with us?” becomes a long explanation about “stressful” situations, including reference to a “clean colon.” However, it is Sheldon who responds, “Leonard, I’m not expert [*sic*] here but I believe in the context of a luncheon invitation, you might want to skip the reference to bowel movements.” The truth of Sheldon’s claim makes the obviousness of Leonard’s attempt and Sheldon’s correction grounds for humor as Sheldon’s comment aligns with what we have learned thus far about his character: he typically lacks social expertise and directly acknowledges that lack in the exchange. However, from Sheldon’s correction, Penny realizes that they have invited her to lunch which was obscured in Leonard’s “request.” Leonard’s and Sheldon’s social impairments in such social situations are certainly incongruous with their high IQs mentioned in the opening scene (and later in the episode) and are confirmed in the next scene.

Penny is now shown in their apartment and has commented on their whiteboards that contain many equations. While they argue about the quality and veracity of their own whiteboards, Penny sits down on the very end of the right side of the couch (from the viewer’s perspective) and wants to begin eating. However, Sheldon is noticeably uncomfortable:

Penny: Uh, do you guys mind if I start?

Sheldon: Um, Penny, that’s where I sit.

Penny: So, sit next to me.

Sheldon: No, I sit there.

Penny: What's the difference?

Sheldon: What's the difference?

Leonard: Here we go.

Sheldon: In the winter that seat is close enough to the radiator to remain warm, and yet not so close as to cause perspiration. In the summer it's directly in the path of a cross breeze created by open windows there, and there. It faces the television at an angle that is neither direct, thus discouraging conversation, nor so far wide to create a parallax distortion, I could go on, but I think I've made my point.

Penny: Do you want me to move?

Sheldon: Well.

Leonard: Just sit somewhere else.

Sheldon: Fine. (Wanders in circles, looking lost.)

Leonard: Sheldon, sit!

Sheldon: Aaah!

In this social exchange, Leonard has told Penny to make herself comfortable, and she has chosen an empty seat. But, Sheldon tries to claim his personal space when he says, "that's where I sit" and "I sit there"; Sheldon does not know how to react to this change in his routine. Penny

invites him to sit next to her, but he declines and explains in detail why this is his preferred seat. The fact that Sheldon gives a long explanation is a surprise to Penny and the viewers, but not to Leonard who prefaces Sheldon's next utterance with "Here we go," indicating to viewers and Penny that what follows is typical of Sheldon. Here we see brevity is not Sheldon's strength, and in providing long explanations, he makes both Penny and Leonard uncomfortable. Leonard then tells Sheldon to sit elsewhere and viewers now see Sheldon looking "lost" as he approaches several spaces in the room to identify a replacement seat. When Leonard demands that he "sit!", Sheldon takes a space on the couch on the opposite end from Penny and expresses "fake comfort" by saying "Aaah!" His facial expressions and behaviors are outside social expectations and the way he says "aaah" actually expresses his discomfort, while also appeasing Leonard and Penny. But, a few moments later, Penny leaves her seat to get a tissue and Sheldon jumps into her seat and expresses a very pleasing smile to indicate he is now "truly" happy in "his seat" and his behavior creates humor.

To further clarify Sheldon's social impairment, in season One's "The Hamburger Postulate," viewers are once again invited into Sheldon's socially naïve world. Leonard, in response to Penny's current disinterest in him, has coitus with Leslie (a colleague). The scene opens with Sheldon scuttling out of his apartment to ask Penny for help, and he says, "I need your opinion on a matter of semiotics" (Lorre and Prady, "The Hamburger Postulate"). However, Penny doesn't understand his request. Sheldon and Penny then go to Sheldon's apartment and toward Leonard's room where a necktie is located on the door (the semiotic conundrum at hand):

Sheldon: Well?

Penny: Well what?

Sheldon: What does it mean?

Penny: Oh, come on, you went to college.

Sheldon: Yes, but I was eleven.

Penny: Alright, look, a tie on the doorknob usually means someone doesn't want to be disturbed because they're, you know, getting busy.

Sheldon: So you're saying Leonard has a girl in there.

Penny: Well, either that or he's lost his tie rack and gotten really into Bryan Adams.

Leslie (voice off): Oh Leonard, you magnificent beast.

Penny: We really shouldn't be standing here.

First, Sheldon's use of the word "semiotics" in his initial request for assistance is such an odd choice. He could just say, "Penny I need your help" but instead chooses a more complex word and a follow-up explanation that is even more confusing to her. Finally Sheldon says "Just come with me." Penny then tries to explain to the "genius" what the tie on the door means by saying "oh, come on, you went to college" but Sheldon reminds her he was eleven when he was in college. She then offers a simple explanation and Sheldon confirms his understanding by saying, "So you're saying Leonard has a girl in there." Here viewers witness Sheldon's naiveté; his college "age" is a surprise that offers fodder for the comedic situation, while also simultaneously confirming his claims to being a genius, thus his resultant naiveté about this situation provides insight into why he might be lacking social prowess and acuity.

As Penny and Sheldon move away from the door, they have another brief exchange about whether this situation happened before, and Sheldon tells Penny, "Oh, yes, but there's usually planning, courtship, and advance

notice. Last time I was able to book a cruise to the Arctic to see a solar eclipse.” Penny says, “Wait, you had to leave the state because your roommate was having sex?” And Sheldon replies, “I didn’t have to, the dates just happened to coincide.” The humor in this exchange arises from the explicit truth of the coincidence and the incongruity of the “advanced notice” Sheldon says has come before. Penny is surprised that Sheldon booked a cruise to avoid the situation but then he says it was a coincidence therefore the incongruity between “advance notice” and “coincidence” provides fodder for the exchange.

After Penny and Sheldon figure out the woman is Leslie, Sheldon says he does not know the situation protocol, which once again sets up his lack of social expertise, and viewers then witness Sheldon’s obvious discomfort. He sits in “his spot,” keeps awkwardly looking toward the bedroom area, and finally dials a number on his cell phone and says “Hi, Leonard. It’s me, Sheldon. In the living room. I just wanted you to know I saw the tie. Message received. You’re welcome. You carry on. Give my best to Leslie.” Clearly, Sheldon’s lack of expertise in this situation bothers him, but knowing that Leonard is having coitus with Leslie does not prohibit him from calling and offers fodder for humor (as is the fact that Leonard answers!).

While many more examples demonstrate the presence of his social impairment, but I now move to the second characteristic of Asperger’s, narrow interest, which occurs when people have only a small handful of things with which they want to participate (Beahm; Welton). Once again, the first episode provides cues about Sheldon’s narrow interest, largely his own interest in science and science fiction, as he tells Leonard that they are to watch *Battlestar Galactica* only this time “with commentary.” We also learn of Sheldon’s primary interest in physics with his whiteboard prominently displayed in the apartment (Leonard’s whiteboard is off to the viewer’s left, and is not the focal point upon entry into the apartment). In later episodes and seasons, viewers are frequently reminded of Sheldon’s

primary interest in physics, and his limited social interactions are always centered on his special interests (e.g., paint ball or comic books).

For example, in season three, episode 14, “The Einstein Approximation,” Sheldon is all-consumed with a physics formula on his whiteboard. He doesn’t sleep for several days and spends every waking moment trying to fix the equation, which negatively impacts his communication. Bernadette (Howard’s girlfriend) convinces Sheldon to get some sleep, so he can be more logical and rational, and Sheldon “agrees.” Viewers then see Penny and Leonard asleep and Leonard’s phone rings. A security guard at what appears to be something equivalent to a Chuck E. Cheese Restaurant has called to ask Leonard to “retrieve” Sheldon from an establishment he has illegally entered. Leonard now is much like a parent who must pick up a child when s/he has done something wrong and the incongruity of Leonard having to take care of Sheldon is observed. Upon his arrival, Leonard thanks the security guard for not calling the police, and the guard says, “Oh, hey, it’s no big deal. My sister’s got a kid who’s special,” which is a clear reference to Sheldon’s Asperger’s-like behavior. Viewers then see a well-established physicist in his pajamas in a children’s ball pit, and such incongruity draws initial laughs. However, this laughter is exacerbated when the comedic situation intensifies. Leonard tells Sheldon to get out of the pit, but Sheldon refuses and tells Leonard to come get him by saying, “You can try, but you’ll never catch me” and disappears under the balls. Leonard enters the pit and Sheldon repeatedly pops out of the pit yelling “Bazinga!” each time. The surprise of Sheldon playing a child’s game of hide-and-seek and yelling “Bazinga!” is irrational for a man his age and incongruously funny because we do not expect that Sheldon would play children’s games, and because now there are two well-established physicists in a children’s ball pit. Clearly, Sheldon’s physics interest fed his determination to fix the equation and led him into an awkward, though

socially-amusing, situation where others must take care of him, mainly Leonard.

Sheldon's interest in science is also foregrounded in one episode with Amy Farrah Fowler, his (girl)friend. In season 4, episode 20, "The Herb Garden Germination," Sheldon and Amy conduct an experiment about gossip. They concoct two false statements, "Sheldon and I engaged in sexual intercourse. In other news, I'm thinking of starting an herb garden" in order to experiment with the spread of gossip in social groups. Their research confirms their beliefs about which news will travel faster (sexual intercourse). The fact that Amy and Sheldon want to test this social hypothesis coupled with the two contrary and disconnected statements they initially use are so incongruous as to be funny. After all, the friends have commented on Amy and Sheldon's relationship throughout their courtship and in previous seasons have discussed Sheldon's disinterest in dating anyone. Therefore, had Sheldon "recognized" their interest in his sexuality earlier, he would not have been surprised by the findings of this experiment. The first statement in the experiment clarifies the quandary about Sheldon's sexual orientation for the group and would certainly move faster in a social group of 20-somethings where dating and romance are prominent.

In addition to physics and science, Sheldon has a second interest in comic books and superheroes. Sheldon spends much of his time reading comic books, debating comic books and superheroes, and visiting the comic book store. Furthermore, Sheldon is often seen wearing superheroes t-shirts, such as the Green Lantern and The Flash. In fact, much of Sheldon's salary appears to go toward the purchase of collectibles, as well as attending Comic-Con (or medieval festivals) and comic book signings ("The Excelsior Acquisition"), and dressing up as superheroes for various events or parties (e.g., "The Justice League Recombination"). But, while Howard, Raj, and Leonard engage in these behaviors, they exhibit other interests that are more socially appropriate. However, Sheldon's primary

interests do not typically deviate from physics or comic books, or his other specific routines. The fact that a 20-something successful researcher has limited interests and that he does not view his own behavior as incongruous to the social expectations of 20-somethings because of his perceived superiority precipitates humor and reflects many behaviors of those with Asperger's.

An analysis of the third characteristic of Asperger's, a compulsive need for introducing routines and interests, demonstrates that this group is an exemplar. Each night has its own designated routine, from food to events, and deviations from them cause much discomfort for Sheldon. For example, Sheldon designates each night's routines, such as Wednesday is comic book store night, Thursday is old video game night, Saturday is laundry night, etc. While the others engage in these routines, they are not uncomfortable if routines change. A clear example occurs in season one, episode five, "The Hamburger Postulate," where viewers witness Sheldon's first Cheesecake Factory experience. Since Sheldon has never been to this restaurant, he is uncomfortable and can't order because he doesn't know what is good. Penny says the burgers are good and recites the various offerings, but Sheldon is still flummoxed. How can he order a burger when he knows he likes the Big Boy burger? Penny says the barbecue burger is like the Big Boy burger, and Sheldon replies, "Excuse me, in a world that already includes the Big Boy, why would I settle for something like a Big Boy."

Clearly, Sheldon's taste for cuisine is limited by his need for specified routines and food. Changes in either or both cause great discomfort, much like the discomfort experienced by those with Asperger's who have breaks in routines (Welton). However, since most viewers are superior to Sheldon in this case because they can eat at new establishments without much difficulty, this is an apparent incongruity; Sheldon's difficulty with a new restaurant and food are exacerbated by the focus of the dialogue and repeated reference to the "The Big Boy," which also emphasizes

Sheldon's behavioral difficulty in the situation. Sheldon's clear discomfort and assumed superiority in the situation lay the grounds for incongruity in the scene and again precipitates humor.

Season two, episode five, "The Euclid Alternative," where Leonard has to work nights and cannot take Sheldon to and from work, which is written in the "roommate agreement,"⁵ is another example of a compulsive need for routines and establishing communication norms. Sheldon doesn't understand why Leonard won't abide by the agreement and take him to work. Suddenly, Sheldon is shown knocking three times on Penny's door (another routine) to ask her to take him. Penny reluctantly agrees, and on their way to the university, Sheldon says, "You're going up Euclid Avenue?" Penny affirms this, and he says, "Leonard takes Los Robles Avenue." Viewers begin to see how uncomfortable Sheldon is with a new route, and he provides Penny an explanation for why Los Robles Avenue is better. Eventually, reminding Penny of his regular routines with Leonard and his overt, repeated concern about her "reckless nonchalance regarding the check-engine light" in her car annoy her so much, she leaves Sheldon by the side of the road. The fact that Penny is doing him a favor by driving him to work is obscured by his desire and need for routines. Penny's command for Sheldon to exit the vehicle comes as a surprise, but the fact that he can't understand the situation or notice that Penny is disinterested in his typical routines provides the fodder for the scene, especially since his need for routines has left him stranded.

Later in the episode, Sheldon falsely assumes Leonard will take him home from work and then has Howard take him home on the back of his Vespa where Sheldon is shown screaming, "Oh God, not Euclid Avenue" (5). This is humorous because viewers are reminded of Sheldon's trip into work with Penny, the apparent speed bumps on this road, and his need for routines. In the next scene, Raj picks Sheldon up where Howard has left him and tells Sheldon he is taking him home, but Sheldon says,

Oh, but I'm not going home. It's Wednesday. Wednesday is new comic book day, we have to go to the comic book store. And then, we have to stop at the Soup Plantation, it's creamy tomato soup day, and Radio Shack, there's a sale on triple-a batteries. Plus, we have to go to Pottery Barn and return my Star Wars sheets.

In these few scenes, viewers observe that Sheldon's first Asperger's-like characteristic, social impairment, does not allow him to see that his friends are doing him a favor and his requests and behaviors are inappropriate and annoying. This, coupled with his discomfort in breaking routines, makes this scene extreme in terms of expectations for friends and provides the grounds for comedy. Sheldon assumes his friends will do things for him and is unable to recognize how he is violating social norms by pushing the limits on requesting favors. Even Raj gives up and drops him at the apartment building where Sheldon is now shown asking Penny if she can drive him to Pottery Barn, which she refuses by simply shutting the door. Sheldon's compulsive need for routines and his lack of social prowess and acuity in these situations make these interactions funny. The fact that he can't understand these situations because his routines blind him to others' courtesy is another incongruity that indicates he is clearly a "fish out of water" (Smith 33).

Additional examples of characteristic three might be discussed, however I now analyze Sheldon's speech and language peculiarities, the fourth characteristic. Most people recognize and abide by conversational norms, but because of Sheldon's social impairment, his inability to follow conversational norms on a regular basis also leads to comedic situations. First, he focuses on facts and offers longer explanations than necessary, which is peculiar. For example, in the opening scene of "The Pilot" discussed above, he explains to Penny why her current seat is "his seat," in "The Euclid Alternative" he explains why Euclid Avenue is not the best alternative, and in "The Tangerine Factor" when Leonard says Penny won't talk about her breakup and Sheldon says, "Not surprising. Penny's

emotional responses originate from the primitive portion of the brain known as the Amygdala, while speech is centered in the much more recently developed Neocortex. The former can easily overpower the latter giving scientific credence to the notion of being rendered speechless” (season one, episode 17). His explanations are not socially appropriate in typical conversations, but he does not understand that they are extraneous and thus not welcomed. However, the unexpected lengthy explanations are peculiar enough to be comedic and also quite like those offered by many people who have Asperger’s.

Another useful example occurs in a later episode when Sheldon assists Penny after she slipped in the shower and dislocated her shoulder: “Not surprising. You have no safety mat or adhesive stickers to allow for purchase on a surface with a low coefficient of static friction.” Penny says, “What?” and Sheldon says, with much brevity, “Tubs are slippery.” Here, Sheldon’s speech and language peculiarities once again delay her understanding, thus making his second comment funny because it stands in contradistinction to his longer, more confusing, statement. And, later in the same episode, when Penny does not want Sheldon to see her naked, he says, “Oh. Well, that’s understandable. You may be interested to know that a prohibition against looking is well established in heroic mythology. Uh, Lot and his wife, Perseus and Medusa, Orpheus and Eurydice.” This explanation is superfluous but is something Sheldon does to make himself more comfortable and to make himself appear knowledgeable in front of others. But, in this case, Penny says, “Yeah, great,” thus expressing her disinterest, which he cannot understand as disinterest, and he responds, “They always look. It never ends well.”

Not only does Sheldon need to offer these superfluous explanations, but he also does not like to be interrupted when offering them. Therefore, he exhibits unique nonverbal communication, the fifth Asperger’s characteristic, as he contorts his face and rapidly blinks his eyes. For example, in “The Friendship Algorithm” Sheldon is explaining tapioca

and Howard interrupts, "I'm thinking about growing a moustache" and then he, Raj, and Leonard continue this conversation until Leonard says, "Alright this is cruel, we better let him finish before his head explodes." Clearly, they know that Sheldon uses long explanations, and they have devised a plan to interrupt him so that they can see his physical response. This, however, is not his only nonverbal difficulty.

Sheldon's primary nonverbal communication problem is that he cannot read others' emotions and thus cannot interpret sarcasm. In the aforementioned "The Adhesive Duck Deficiency" where Penny has fallen in the tub, we see just how incapable Sheldon is in reading social situations and emotions. Sheldon asks Penny questions on the hospital admission form, but Penny says what she needs is "comforting." Sheldon says, "I'm sorry. There, there. Everything's going to be fine. Sheldon's here." Sheldon's inability to offer comfort until Penny's direct request is comedic, especially in the way he responds. His insincere "there, there" and the awkward way in which he touches Penny are definite clues to his deficiency. Viewers observe how uncomfortable he is in this new situation (see characteristic one above) and his inability to provide sincere emotional support to Penny in an emergency is the basis for humor in this scene. However, this episode also allows viewers to see some growth for Sheldon in that when a question on the medical form asks, "When was your last menstrual cycle?" And Penny says, "Oh, next question." He says, "I'll put, in progress." Clearly he was able to read her tone of voice and used an assumed stereotype about women and their mood changes during menstruation, thus demonstrating some social understanding and communicative growth.

One other nonverbal communication difficulty occurs when Sheldon is asked to keep a secret in "The Bad Fish Paradigm." For him, the secret must be plausible, and if he feels he has to lie to others when events are not plausible, he gets nonverbal tics. He describes this himself when Penny asks him to keep a secret from Leonard about her not finishing

community college: “Secret keeping is a complicated endeavor. One has to be concerned not only about what one says, but about facial expression, autonomic reflexes. When I try to deceive, I myself have more nervous tics than a Lyme disease research facility.” Sheldon acknowledges that his nonverbal tics are heightened when he is asked to keep secrets from others. In fact, when he feels pressured to tell his secrets, he often removes himself from the situation entirely, such that in this episode he moves out of the apartment so as not to reveal the secret. His extreme decision to move out coupled with his nonverbal tics is the basis for humor in this episode. Sheldon would rather tell the truth no matter the consequence than keep a secret because he knows he will nonverbally express it.

However, when it comes to outright lies, he would rather embellish the lie to make it more plausible, so that if someone researched the lie his expressions would be more congruous with the situation. For example, in “The Loobenfeld Decay” Leonard does not want to attend Penny’s theatrical performance and lies to her. Sheldon is guilt-ridden, tells Penny about Leonard’s lie, and then offers his own, more plausible lie.

Sheldon: Well, first of all, your lie was laughably transparent, where mine is exquisitely convoluted. While you were sleeping I was weaving an un-unravelable web.

Leonard: Un-unravelable?

Sheldon: Yes, if she Googles Leopold Houston she’ll find a Facebook page, an online blog depicting his descent into drug use, and a desperate yet hopeful listing on e-harmony.com.

Leonard: Okay, why would I go to a drug intervention for your cousin.

Sheldon: Ah, because it’s in Long Beach, and I don’t drive.

Leonard: We're going to Long Beach?

Sheldon: No, of course not. There's no cousin Leo. There's no intervention. Focus Leonard.

Leonard: Oh, come on!

Sheldon: We just leave the house on Friday night, and we return in the wee hours emotionally wrung out from the work of convincing Leo to go back into rehab.

In this episode, Sheldon realizes that Penny could find out the lie is a ruse, so he concocts a story about his "cousin Leo" and "rehab," and even creates a fake Facebook page to cover his tracks. He would rather the lie seem plausible than have his nonverbal tics give him away. He is aware of his nonverbal communication problems and devises a way to control them in a stressful situation thus making his lie peculiar and humorous.

The final Asperger's characteristic is motor clumsiness and appears to be Sheldon's least prominent characteristic. Sheldon doesn't exhibit this in most instances, except driving vehicles (e.g., "The Euclid Alternative) or when he is stressed about situations. Recall "The Einstein Approximation" above where Sheldon's behavior becomes child-like in the ball pit. When Sheldon has not slept in days, he is shown awkwardly turning his body back and forth toward his whiteboard that holds the troublesome equation. He excuses his awkward motor movements with a scientific explanation about engaging his "superior colliculus," which positions the awkward behavior against his genius, thus making him seem less awkward. However, when Sheldon does feel uncomfortable in situations, such as the scene mentioned above where Penny unknowingly sits in his seat ("The Pilot") or when Penny invites him into her apartment, and Sheldon appears "lost" while trying to find his "spot" in unfamiliar territory ("The Tangerine Factor"), Sheldon's movements become quite exaggerated and

clumsy. When he is stressed or in new situations, these clumsy moments may appear but are often obscured by one or more of the more prominent characteristics described above.

The analysis above demonstrates just how similar Sheldon's behaviors are to people with Asperger's, and it is the similarities that provide fodder and incongruities necessary for this comedy. More examples from each episode, throughout the seven seasons, would further support this analysis, but they are too numerous to include here. However key questions emerge: Why is identifying Sheldon as someone with Asperger's important? And why would the creators avoid such a diagnosis?

Conclusion: Conundrum or not?

As evidenced above, Sheldon's behaviors often align with those found in people on the autism spectrum, particularly those with Asperger's Syndrome, and while many autism and Asperger's bloggers argue for a diagnosis, the creators and writers refuse to label his behavior as anything other than Sheldon just being "Sheldony." From social impairments, narrow interests, discomfort in new situations, violations of routines, the inability to read emotions, and some motor clumsiness, Sheldon clearly exhibits Asperger's characteristics, often several at one time, and provides the incongruities necessary for comedy. Comedies rely on quirkiness and viewers certainly encounter that in this series, so why do creators Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady shy away from labeling that quirkiness when doing so can raise awareness of an identified disorder? Sheldon's social difficulties and/or perceived lack of caring set the groundwork for humorous situations where numerous incongruities arise from the discrepancy between his being an intellectual "genius," which many on the spectrum are, and a socially awkward member of society, which those "on the spectrum" can and do exhibit. The creators identify his genius and emphasize the fact that he is not "crazy" (his mother had him tested) but

what is never directly uttered in the dialogue is what the testing was trying to assess.

Clearly, Sheldon is a focused, diligent scientist and has a keen interest in facts of all types, which also reflect many people “on the spectrum.” There was a great missed opportunity in “The Einstein Approximation” above to identify Asperger’s, even briefly, when the security guard says to Leonard, “Oh, hey, it’s no big deal. My sister’s got a kid who’s special.” In fact, it is Sheldon’s assumed superiority over others based on his genius IQ and his success as a physicist that are often the show’s most prominent comedic moments; therefore, having Sheldon identify as or be identified as “on the spectrum” would not mitigate situations within which he finds himself or lessen the humor of the show, especially when many with Asperger’s exhibit similar social difficulties and are learning to overcome or manage them. The creators would not have to apologize for such a diagnosis and instead would be offering a great public service by increasing awareness. It is clear Sheldon is a work in progress and continues to learn social norms and mores, as do those with Asperger’s. And, even though the creators fear that identifying Sheldon on the autism spectrum may lessen the show’s success or marginalize people with Asperger’s, they are missing an opportunity to acknowledge Sheldon’s behavior as “on the spectrum” or even as Asperger’s, especially when Clifton reminds us that Sheldon “has distinguished himself in a career that relies very little on social interaction and rewards the ability to engage with inanimate matter,” and viewers can celebrate his success while also laughing at his communicative deficiencies (63).

In summary, what cannot be ignored is the fact that at least five of the six characteristics of Asperger’s are readily present (one, motor clumsiness, is less prominent) and provide a framework for understanding Sheldon’s deficiencies, which are incongruous with Westernized social norms, thus providing the framework for humor; yet, Sheldon is also a “social” work in progress as he learns about sarcasm and its functions,

pulls pranks on others and recognizes that he has done so (“Bazinga!”), and attempts to empathize with others over seven seasons, thus making the timing quite ripe for a diagnosis. We can still laugh at how his deficiencies defy his being a genius because he is “wrapped up in” what he is doing and not focusing on the social or emotional situation (Rickman 10). Perhaps the time is now to have Sheldon embrace his communicative differences and in doing so help audiences better understand Asperger’s. As Kinnison notes,

The popular TV show “Big Bang Theory” puts an obviously hyper-intelligent male Aspie, Sheldon [*sic*], up against the emotionally/socially-intelligent woman across the hall, Penny. Comedy ensues. The show is so popular around the world that it’s not out of line to suggest it is single-handedly changing attitudes toward extreme geekery and Aspie traits, much as “Will and Grace” [*sic*] made harmless and acceptable a stereotypical flaming homosexual character, Jack. So not only is the show funny and original in mining super-geek traits for humor, it is probably educating people on accepting and valuing Aspies.” (par. 4)

After all, we laugh at fat jokes on shows like *Mike and Molly*, *King of Queens*, and *South Park*, racial jokes on shows like *The Simpsons* and *Seinfeld*, sexual orientation jokes on shows like *Will and Grace* and *Roseanne*, etc. all in the context of the television sitcom, so why not affirm Sheldon’s diagnosis and watch him learn and grow over the course of the series as a person with Asperger’s Syndrome rather than simply gloss it out of fear of losing an audience? The fear of marginalizing people with Asperger’s is real, but comedies often provide opportunities to identify, manage, and discuss people’s differences or disabilities. Creators can use their talents to challenge, even subvert, mainstream assumptions in a comedic context, as many others have done and continue to do (i.e., *Modern Family*). In fact, we already laugh at Raj’s selective-mutism in

The Big Bang Theory and watched a young Max Braverman on *Parenthood* be diagnosed with Asperger's. The creators of *The Big Bang Theory* are definitely missing an opportunity to affirm Asperger's with a character that has shown sitcom staying power as well as social and relational growth, and who continues to try to understand and apply Westernized, communicative norms. Stereotyping and marginalization are always a fear when creating comedies, but subversion of cultural norms and understandings can't occur without the creators taking a risk.

Notes

- ¹ The term "deficiency" is problematic because of its association with "disease." However, Westernized communicative norms are the basis for comparison, therefore I use "deficiencies" and "inadequacies" to emphasize the difference. Also, while I'm not certified to diagnose Sheldon, I use the Asperger's characteristics to argue such a claim.
- ² Humor studies are the focus of many TV analyses and help us understand humor and how it is derived in comedies. Humor types include incongruity theory, superiority theory, relief (release) theory, and social identity theory. See Berger, Ferguson and Ford, Gillon, Meyer, Paolucci and Richardson, Senzani, Stokoe, Thompson, and Wright for discussion.
- ³ See the work of Frith, Laurent, and Rubin, Rubin and Lennon, and Welton.
- ⁴ Friends know the rules for being friends but do NOT write them down and sign them.

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