

WORKSHOP F-9

Dr.'s Sheldon Cooper and Temple Grandin: A Big Bang Approach to the Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships

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*TRACKS: Clinical & School Psychologist; Individual with ASD; Parent & Family Member;
Social Worker & Counselor; Speech-Language Pathologist*

WORKSHOP ABSTRACT:

Popular media increasingly highlights the idiosyncratic quirks of individuals with Asperger's Syndrome, helping shape lay individuals perceptions. Sheldon Cooper of the Big Bang Theory displays Asperger's Syndrome characteristics in a hospitable, well supported, and humorous manner. Given the show's popularity, it is a perfect medium for teaching social skills to students with ASD, aligning media with Temple Grandin's text: *The Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships*.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

1. Participants will be able to gain an awareness of the impact of popular television's portrayals of individuals with ASD.
2. Participants will be able to discuss the validity of the presentation, controversies regarding stereotypes of individuals with ASD/Asperger's and potential benefits of popular televisions portrayals.
3. Participants will be able to understand how the Big Bang Theory can be used to develop a curriculum for working with students on the spectrum, targeting the social skills aligned with Temple Grandin's *Unwritten Rules for Social Relationships*.

Lisa M. Meeks, MA, PhD, ABD

specializes in working with individuals with ASD during periods of transition and has consulted on the topic at some of the leading colleges in the US, including: The University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University. Her work is especially relevant to transitions into college and from college to work. She is committed to advancing the employability of individuals with ASD and serves on the Board of Directors for Mindspark Training Academy, an organization dedicated to employing individuals with ASD. Lisa's programmatic experience includes the development of support groups for students with ASD at the University of Alabama, John Carroll University, and Case Western Reserve University. Lisa frequently presents on ASD topics at conferences and workshops across the United States and recently signed a book contract with Jessica Kingsley publishers.

Tracy Loye Masterson, PhD

received her degree in Clinical Psychology in 2007 from Kent State University after completing her pre-doctoral internship in pediatric psychology at the A.I. DuPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Delaware. Dr. Masterson also completed a post-doctoral fellowship in pediatric behavioral health at the Cleveland Clinic Children's Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. Currently, Dr. Masterson is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at John Carroll University, where she specializes in clinical child and adolescent psychology. Throughout her clinical and academic training, Dr. Masterson has received specialized training in working with individuals with developmental disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder. While her research interests have primarily focused on regimen adherence in pediatric populations, Dr. Masterson is interested in expanding her applied research and academic interests to Autism Spectrum Disorder. Dr. Masterson has extensive clinical experience in working with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in a variety of clinical settings and hopes to combine her clinical knowledge and teaching experiences to inform students about Autism Spectrum Disorder and facilitate student interest in this clinical population.

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12th ANNUAL 2014

**AUTISM SPECTRUM
DISORDER
CONFERENCE**



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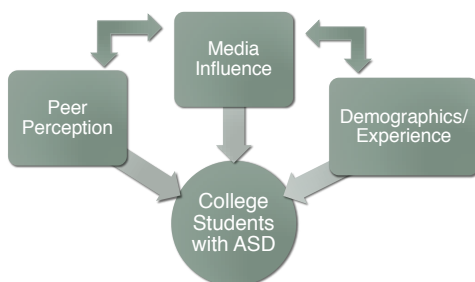
Lisa M. Meeks, PhD, University of California-San Francisco and
Tracy L. Masterson, PhD, John Carroll University

Speaker Disclosure Information

Tracy L. Masterson, PhD is an Associate Professor of Psychology at John Carroll University, and creator of the John Carroll Autism Internship (Cleveland Clinic and Belfaire-Monarch Center for Autism) and is speaking at the conference on a voluntary basis. She is on the planning committee for Milestones 12th Annual Autism Spectrum Conference and has no relevant financial relationships to disclose.

Lisa M. Meeks, PhD is an administrator at the University of California, San Francisco, author and consultant and is speaking at the conference on a voluntary basis. She is also a member of the board of Mindspark training academy-vocational training for talented and qualified individuals with specialized abilities, particularly young adults on the autism spectrum. She has no financial relationships to disclose.

What Happens When.....



Significance of the Problem

- 1 in 68 individuals is thought to have ASD (CDC, 2014).
- Today's audiences are spending approximately 20% of each day engaging in television viewing (Neilson, 2012).
- Individuals with ASD are often negatively stereotyped and are at risk for stigmatization (Butler & Gillis, 2010).
- Often times, this stigma comes directly from student's peer group (Campbell and colleagues, 2004, 2006, 2007).

The Big Bang Theory-TBBT

- Premiering in September 2007, currently (April 2014) the show is the Number 1 syndicated comedy on television.
- The fifth season of the show opened with over 14 million viewers, which has increased to 20 million for the sixth season.
- TBBT was nominated for over 10 Emmy Awards and has won two Emmy Awards since 2009.
- It has a wide international audience, televised in numerous countries.

The Study.....

The purpose of the study was to examine college students' perceptions about and behavioral intentions toward Dr. Sheldon Cooper.

This study will also examine the frequency with which college students identify Dr. Sheldon Cooper as having Asperger Syndrome-as well as how college student knowledge of Asperger Syndrome and viewing patterns of The Big Bang Theory influence their rating of Sheldon Cooper as an individual on the spectrum.

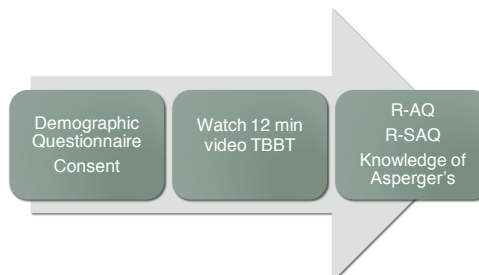
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Social Learning Theory & Media

- "Children and adults acquire attitudes, emotional responses, and new styles of conduct through filmed and televised modeling" (Bandura, 1977)
- Much of the media research guided by social learning theory has focused on the negative attitudes and behaviors of television (Wahl, 1995)
- Media exposure can enhance positive and accepting attitudes and behaviors, especially if media character is likeable (Bandura, 2004; Cohen, 2011; Moyer-Guse, 2008)

Procedures

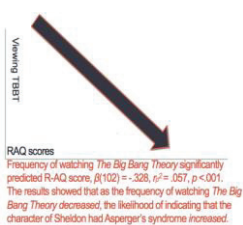


Results

Do College Students think Sheldon has ASD?

Results showed that 71 (69.6%) of participants indicated that the character of Dr. Sheldon Cooper has Asperger's.

What effect does watching TBBT have on rating of Sheldon on the R-AQ?



Why Sheldon for an ASD Group?

Dr. Sheldon Cooper



Star of the **BIG BANG THEORY**, Theoretical Physicist and College Professor

Sheldon Cooper

- Sheldon Cooper, BS, MS, MA, PhD, ScD
- With an IQ of 187, is a theoretical physicist studying quantum mechanics and string theory
- Exhibits all DSM-IV criteria for Asperger's Syndrome (Meeks, 2013)
 - Social communication
 - Understanding social cues
 - Social reciprocity
- College students view him as having Asperger's

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Dr. Cooper Exhibits Many Criteria for Asperger's Syndrome Including:

- Qualitative impairments in social interaction of non-verbal behaviors (i.e. eye gaze, facial expression, body posture, and gesture to regulate social interaction).
- Failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to age.
- A lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements.
- Lack of social and emotional reciprocity.
- Restricted and repetitive behaviors and an inflexible adherence to routines or rituals.

Sheldon Has Difficulty Reading Social Cues:

- In the television show, Sheldon readily admits that he has difficulty understanding social norms and often **seeks help** from his colleagues by asking about the appropriate "social convention" for a given situation.
- **Sheldon does not easily understand sarcasm and often seeks clarity about the use of sarcasm.**

Rigidity and Resistance to Change:

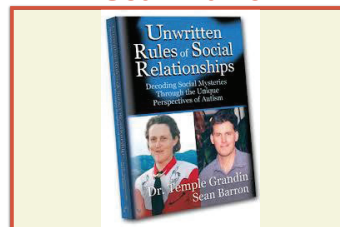
- Sheldon displays a rigid system of **rules**; each of his close relationships is governed by an "agreement," a signed and notarized document that lists detailed expectations and responsibilities for his relationships with his best friend and his girlfriend, Amy.
- **Sheldon abides by a rigid schedule that dictates his diet, the clothing he wears each day, and weekly activities like "laundry day" and "comic book night."**
- Sheldon is also extraordinarily sensitive to **change**, as evidenced by his extreme discomfort when anyone sits in "his spot" on the couch, which is invariably accompanied by a monologue regarding the reasons why he initially chose and claimed it.

Sheldon.....

Asperger's Traits in Sheldon Cooper (Video)

THE RULES 2,4,5,8 & 9

Dr. Temple Grandin and Sean Barron



PhD in Animal Science, Professor/Speaker
Journalist in Youngstown, OH

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**Rule #2: Not Everything Is Equally Important
in the Grand Scheme of Things**

- Black and white thinking/rigidity
- Imagine living with no “ifs” or “buts” emotions are either ON or OFF
- Making mountains out of mole hills....
- We call it lack of a plan B, the inability to see options and resources in the event something doesn't go as planned
- There are several rich examples in TBBT...

Examples of Rule #2



**Rule #4: Honesty Is
Different than Diplomacy**

- The honesty of students with ASD is one of the greatest assets and worst challenges
- As a society we value honesty, “honesty is the best policy”
- BUT.....a host of *variations* and *exceptions* wreak havoc on the lives of individuals with ASD.
- The distinction between honesty and diplomacy isn't taught
- “Courtesy rules”

Examples of Rule #4

Rule #4

Video

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**Rule #5: Being Polite Is
Appropriate in Any Situation**

- Grandin says that *"Being Polite and Having Good Manners Gains You Entry into Social Group Interactions"*
 - -regardless of age, context
- Demonstrates that you understand the boundaries of group behavior.
- Allows you "Access to Level 1"
- Manners are relationship builders
- Although they vary within cultures and context, everyone notices when they are **absent**

Examples for Rule #5



**Rule #8: Know When You Are
Turning People Off!**

- Often referred to as "putting your foot in your mouth" or "being clueless"
- People not on the spectrum have a sixth-sense about when they are turning people off-they are able to:
 - Read body language
 - A shift in voice
 - Or dead silence
- Individuals with ASD are often unaware of these blunders
- Without social graces, they find it difficult to escape these situations or do not understand fully why their words were offensive

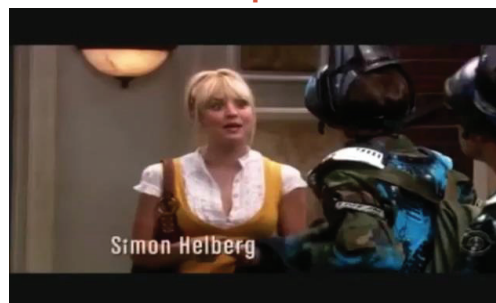
Rule #8



**Rule #9: "Fitting In" Is Often Tied to
Looking and Sounding Like You Fit In**

- Social conformity gains entrance into social circles.
- The outside package is just as important as the inside package.
- While we don't want to change people with ASD, they must understand this basic rule.
- Society expects that you adhere to a 'dress code' for specific context (employment, dates).
- Language or behavior also mandates whether you fit in.
- We are actors in the play of life, but society is the director!

Example #9



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**RECOGNIZING
THAT IT CAN BE
DIFFICULT.....**

And having that be O.K.

Video

CONSIDERATIONS

- Continued use of TBBT as a tool for introducing individuals outside the spectrum to some generalized behaviors of students with ASD
- Continued use of TBBT as a tool for social skill development in students with ASD
- Highlights disparities in clinicalization of Sheldon in relation to viewing habits
- Inspire-motivate-validate

CAUTIONS

- Potential perpetuation of stereotype
- Expectations "higher "aspie" ideal (stable job/ relationship/friendships)
- Reducing ownership of diagnosis
- Reduction in legitimacy of diagnosis (global functioning)