

Spring 2011

**“Media Representations of Disabled Persons: A Content Analysis of Disabled Characters on Network Television Shows in the United States from 2008 to the Present”**

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**Undergraduate Honors Thesis**

**Spring 2011**

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## **Abstract**

### **Objectives of Research:**

Stereotypes of various groups of people have existed in our society for countless years. But these stereotypes aren't just found in societal dialogues anymore. No, they now appear in the news, movie, and television programming we watch each day. These stereotypes in the media affect all groups of people but are particularly limiting to minority groups. Past studies have focused on media representations of different gender, racial, or sexual orientation groups, but little research has looked at media portrayals of disabled persons. This study, therefore, sought to use existing research on representations of other minority groups to analyze the media portrayals of persons with disabilities in network television programming in the United States.

### **Methods:**

This study analyzed media representations of disabled persons via a content analysis, which was based in a revised version of Cedric C. Clark's 1969 model of the four stages of representations for minority groups. The model, which was revised in this study, included three distinct categories of representations – pity, limitations, and 3-D character – and 31 potential characteristics to be found in the various portrayals. Fourteen television characters were analyzed in this study based on the revised model and its 31 different characteristics.

### **Results:**

Characters had to exhibit at least 60% of their total characteristics in one category to be deemed that type of representation. Characters with 30% - 59% of their total characteristics in two different categories were deemed a combination representation of both those categories. Categorization for the 14 total characters studied in this content analysis was as follows: two in the pity/limitations combination category; two in the limitations category; two in the

limitations/3-D character combinations category; and eight in the 3-D character category. These results imply that current media representations of disabled persons are quite advanced in relation to the revised version of Clark's model of portrayals for minority groups.

## **Introduction**

All Asian students are good in math. African Americans are great dancers. Women love to cook and clean. No matter the subject, stereotypes of various groups are found from the most basic conversations to broader national and international societal dialogues. And, beyond these discourses, generalizations of people are used in constructing the media content we all consume each and every day. As we watch a television show or a movie, we find ourselves hearing dialogue or following plot lines that align with the stereotypes of different genders, races, or sexual orientations we hear in our homes, schools, or groups of friends. And, with the relationship between media representations and broader societal beliefs becoming stronger each and every day, media have increasingly more power to either dispute or perpetuate prevalent societal stereotypes.

Stereotypes have been studied in both our culture and the mass media for a number of years. But what exactly is a stereotype? Race relations researcher Nadra Kareem Nittle defines stereotypes as “oversimplifications of people groups {sic} widely circulated in certain societies.”<sup>1</sup> Nittle continues her discussion by saying that these stereotypes can cover a myriad of different subjects: academic expectations, personal preferences, and skills or demeanors that a certain group may be supposed to have. These generalizations, by definition, are at times severely limiting to different groups, especially disadvantaged ones.

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<sup>1</sup> Nittle, Nadra Kareem. *What Is a Stereotype?* Race Relations.  
<http://racerelements.about.com/od/understandingrac1/a/WhatIsaStereotype.htm>.

But as limiting as these stereotypes tend to be, they have become a necessary evil in the development of media content. These stereotypes act as shortcuts for understanding different people in society as well as heuristics for many people involved in the media. In fact, because these generalizations have become so salient, many wonder whether they have become essential not only for our day-to-day conversations but also for creating and sustaining media content. The Media Awareness Network of Canada (MAN) sought to better understand the role of stereotypes in the media in their study on heuristics. These researchers found that “Media stereotypes are inevitable, especially in the advertising, entertainment, and news industries, which need as wide an audience as possible to quickly understand information.”<sup>2</sup> MAN continues, “Stereotypes act like codes that give audiences a quick, common understanding of a person or group of people” that makes material more relatable for the mass citizenry.

One researcher who studied the role stereotypes in the media play is Walter Lippmann. In his writings about these media-centered stereotypes, Lippmann discussed what a stereotype was, especially in terms of racial stereotypes in the African American community. Jannette Dates and William Barlow discuss Lippmann and his views in their book *Split Image* which looks at stereotypes of African Americans in the media. In particular, Dates and Barlow focus on what has come to be known as Lippmann’s “classic formulation.” This formulation states that “the stereotype ‘precedes reason’ and ‘as a form of perception imposes a certain character on the data of our senses.’”<sup>3</sup> These authors agree with Lippmann’s assessment that stereotypes color the way we perceive different data and information on groups of people, and that these generalizations act as precursors to reasoning.

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<sup>2</sup> *Media Stereotyping – Introduction*. Media Awareness Network. Accessed: 11/10/2010. <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/>.

<sup>3</sup> Dates, Jannette L. and William Barlow. *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1993.

Once they grappled with Lippmann's definition and purpose of a stereotype, Dates and Barlow moved on to discussing what makes a stereotype useful. The authors reasoned that "to be effective a stereotype must be anticipated by the conditioned perceptions of the beholder as well as existent in the imagination of the image maker" (Dates and Barlow, 1993). Dates and Barlow hold that a stereotype must meet two important criteria in order to be successful: (1) it must be a reasonable enough generalization of a certain group of people to be accepted as true and probable by others; and (2) it must be recognized as significant by both the sender and the receiver. While their research deals primarily with stereotypes of African Americans in the media, their dialogue about stereotype construction and success permeate to discussions of other groups in society as well.

Dates and Barlow, like many other researchers, have looked at how stereotypes in society are reflected in media content. These studies have covered a variety of different groups, including African Americans, women, and homosexuals. But for all the studies done to see how stereotyping in the media affects certain disadvantaged groups, little research exists for how stereotyping in the media affects people with disabilities. For this reason, I set about studying disabled characters on network television shows to try to grasp what kinds of representations and perceptions of the disabled were present in media content today.

## **Literature Review**

In the beginning stages of my research, I found that few studies had actually been done to study media representations of the disabled. While there had been quite a bit of research on different disadvantaged groups, particularly African Americans and homosexuals, there was very little done for people with disabilities. However, I did find relevant literature to serve as the



basis for my own study. My literature review first looks at the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis as a means to establish *why* media representations are important to study for understanding broader societal perceptions of groups. The next piece of literature I review is the one study I found that focused on media representations of the disabled, done by Lynne Roper of the Stirling Media Research Institute, which provided some foundation for my own research. However, I only briefly mention Roper's work in this literature review because it was neither peer-reviewed nor vetted by media scholars, and it was also done on behalf of an advocacy organization. While I learned a lot from Roper's research, I wanted the basis for my thesis to be founded on work that had been scrutinized by reputable scholars.

The third piece of literature I review is the reputable basis of my research: Cedric C. Clark's model for the stages that disadvantaged groups go through in terms of media representations. I found Clark's model to be a strong foundation for my work because it had not only been peer-reviewed by media scholars but had also been used to study media representations of other minority groups, namely homosexuals and American Indians. The final piece of literature I review in this section is a study conducted by Amy Cuddy, Susan Fiske, and Peter Glick regarding warmth and competence levels as ways to measure societal perceptions that lead to media representations. While Cuddy, et. al did not specifically focus their work on disabled representations, I found it important to include their research in the literature review because they hypothesized what media portrayals of disabled persons might look like based on the societal perceptions they found for the disabled.

### **Parasocial Contact Hypothesis**

The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis is a vital theory to study for my work because it reasons *why* media representations are extremely important in terms of public perceptions of

groups. Parasocial Contact Hypothesis comes from the 1954 Contact Hypothesis (also referred to as the Intergroup Contact Theory) which says “that under appropriate conditions interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members.”<sup>4</sup> Edward Schiappa and his colleagues reasoned that technology, primarily technology of the mass media including television and movies, gave the illusion of face-to-face relationships with characters in media. With this new “face-to-face” relationship made possible with television or movie characters, representations of groups, especially disadvantaged groups, in these media were given more import in their ability to either end or perpetuate stereotypes. Ergo, information that would normally have been gleaned from a personal relationship with someone in a minority group is now learned from a media representation of that group, giving more weight to media representations, especially those of minority groups.

### **Lynne Roper and Categorizations of Disabled Representations**

While little research exists for media representations of the disabled, I was able to find one group that had conducted a study on disabled portrayals in the media. Lynne Roper of Stirling Media Research Institute studied media representations of disabled persons and surmised the most common stereotypes associated with disabled characters in the media. Roper broke the media representations into four overarching categories: “They’re all the same,” Victim, Hero, and Villain, paying close attention to the Hero and Victim categories. The hero and victim sections of Roper’s characterization of disabled representations provide at least some basic information for my thesis, as well as a comparison for the characters I studied.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis*. Schiappa, Edward, Peter B. Gregg, and Dean E. Hewes. *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 72, No. 1, March 2005, pp. 92-115.

In the victim category of disabled representations, the person with the disability is a character “who is presented as a helpless object of pity or sympathy.”<sup>5</sup> These victim characters are primarily used to garner pity or sympathy from the audience, and are often looked upon as almost exclusively as “so cute” or childlike. But “the victim stereotype may also be used for comedy, using characters’ disabilities . . . to place them in humorous situations” Two examples of this victim as a humorous portrayal are “Mister Magoo’s blindness or Forrest Gump’s intellectual disability,” which are used to make the character seem inept in social situations or talk out of place (Roper).

Roper explains that the hero portrayals are those that “{overcome} disability, and {become} more ‘normal’ in a heroic way.” While these portrayals would seem to be positive for the disabled community, they, like the victim portrayals, are limiting because they show persons with disabilities as succeeding “in overcoming {the} disability, rather than the many others who must live with theirs” (Roper). In these hero portrayals, an individual is successful in their endeavors, but he or she must overcome his or her disability in order to be successful, implying that a disability is something that must always be “overcome.” Another important caveat of this hero category is that people with disabilities can never be seen as well-rounded because they are always overcoming and never allowed to suffer setbacks like other characters of a dominant group. While not the basis for my own study, Roper’s work is important because it helped me to hypothesize what current portrayals of the disabled might look like, based on past portrayals.

### **Cedric C. Clark’s Four Stages of Media Representation for Minority Groups:**

Cedric C. Clark first introduced his model of the different stages of media representations minority or disadvantaged groups go through in 1969. His model included four distinct stages of

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<sup>5</sup> *Common Portrayals of Persons with Disabilities*. Media Awareness Network. Accessed: 11/10/2010.  
[http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/persons\\_with\\_disabilities/disabilities\\_portrayals.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/persons_with_disabilities/disabilities_portrayals.cfm).

media representations: non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect. The model was primarily used by Clark to study the representations of African Americans, but has since been used to study other disadvantaged groups. Clark's model is perhaps best explained by Amber B. Raley's application of it to study homosexual representations in 2006, and Michael Ray Fitzgerald's application of it to study American Indian representations in November 2010.

The first stage of Clark's model is non-representation or "an outright exclusion from the media."<sup>6</sup> In this stage, a minority group is left out of different programming. Media scholar George Gerbner described this representation as "symbolic annihilation," in which a minority group receives "poor media treatment {that} can contribute to social disempowerment and in which symbolic absence in the media can erase groups and individuals from public consciousness."<sup>7</sup> The converse of this statement is that representation in the media denotes existence and relevance in the larger societal sphere. In his research regarding American Indian portrayals, scholar Michael Fitzgerald explains that many minority groups, ranging from African Americans to American Indians, have seen periods of non-representation that have negatively affected others' perceptions of them.<sup>8</sup>

The second stage of Clark's model is ridicule, characterized by the formerly anonymous groups being shown merely "as objects of derisive humor" (Raley, 23). Ridicule portrayals are those that focus almost exclusively on the negative aspects or stereotypes of a certain group, and include characters that are the epitome of ridiculous caricatures. Fitzgerald notes of the ridicule stage that it is "the stage in which minorities are lampooned and humiliated," and these

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<sup>6</sup> Raley, Amber B. and Jennifer L. Lucas. *Stereotype or Success? Prime-Time Television's Portrayals of Gay Male, Lesbian, and Bisexual Characters*. *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 51(2), 2006, pp. 19-38.

<sup>7</sup> Coleman, Robin R. Means and Emily Chivers Yochim. *Symbolic Annihilation*. *International Encyclopedia of Communication*. Revised: 6/5/2008.

<sup>8</sup> Fitzgerald, Michael R. "Evolutionary Stages of Minorities in the Mass Media": *An Application of Clark's Model to American Indian Television Representations*. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, Vol. 21, pp. 367-384.

characters are often “portrayed as stupid, silly, lazy, irrational, or simply laughable” (370). These portrayals are often based on one or two derogatory stereotypes, and merely represent a small subset of a larger minority group, if applicable at all. Of this stage, Clark found that these representations were both helpful and harmful: disadvantaged groups felt better about themselves because they were finally being represented, but then suffered a self-esteem blow because the representations were so derisive.

Clark’s third stage is known as the regulation stage. This stage of media representations include portrayals where “the minority group is represented in limited, socially acceptable roles” (Raley, 23). Representations that fall in the regulation stage of Clark’s model are often based on one or two positive stereotypes of a group, which is most definitely a step up from the ridicule stage. However, these characters are limited exclusively to these stereotypes and are not able to grow or change like the well-rounded characters of a dominant group. These portrayals most notably include regulatory characters, where minority persons are “enforcers or administrators of the dominant group’s norms. . . {including} police officers, private detectives, spies, military officers, military nurses, and public-school teachers” (Fitzgerald, 370-371). The regulation stage of Clark’s model certainly affords minority groups more respect than previous stages, but with some limiting caveats that make it difficult to grow as a character.

The final stage of Clark’s model is known as the respect stage, characterized mostly by the fact that minority characters are granted equal treatment as all other characters. Fitzgerald notes that movement into the respect stage occurs when “the minority group in question ceases to be portrayed differently from the dominant group, and intergroup/interracial relationships are no longer significant” (371). Of the respect stage, Raley adds that “members of the minority group are presented in both positive and negative roles of everyday life,” a significant characteristic to

note (23). An important delineation between the respect stage and the previous stages is that it includes both good and bad traits of a minority group, and characters are finally seen as well-rounded. This stage is also where one would find characters that interact with children, have romantic relationships, and do other things common of a dominant group character's portrayal (Raley, 23).

### **Amy J.C. Cuddy, Susan T. Fiske, Peter Glick – The Stereotype Content Model and the BIAS Map**

A final source of research for this thesis comes from previous studies done in regards to stereotypes of different disadvantaged groups. Cuddy, et. al provide one such study with their work on warmth and competence levels as dimensions of social perception.<sup>9</sup> These researchers used measurements of perceived warmth and competence levels of certain groups to try to ascertain what media representations of such groups might look like. They studied the formation of stereotypes based on people's perceptions of others in terms of warmth and competence. Cuddy, et. al explain, "The functional significance and universality of the warmth and competence dimensions result from their correspondence to two critical questions basic to surviving and thriving in a social world" (in press, 4). These critical perceptions answer whether or not a person or group of people is (a) friendly, as well as what their intentions are, and (b) competitive enough to pose a threat to our own intentions. The authors hypothesized that warmth and competence would be good indicators of social perceptions, and these perceptions would affect media representations.

The warmth aspect of this Stereotype Content Model, which deals with such things as sincerity or friendliness, allows people to assess others' intentions in social situations. Warmth acts as a direct link to how approachable we feel a person is, and essentially how much we like

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<sup>9</sup> Cuddy, Amy J.C., Susan T. Fiske, Peter Glick. *Warmth and Competence as Universal Dimensions of Social Perception: The Stereotype Content Model and the BIAS Map*. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 2002.

and trust them. On the other hand, the competence aspect of the model focuses on traits like intelligence and efficacy, and answers the question of others' capabilities in achieving their intent. Both of these characteristics play huge roles in determining people's perceptions of others which lead almost directly into the creation of stereotypes. Cuddy, et. al found that perceptions of other people changed as the warmth and competence levels changed; and, that these perceptions directly led into the Behaviors from Intergroup Affect and Stereotypes (or BIAS) map which predicts how people will interact with others (2). In short, different warmth and competence levels elicit different perceptions which help to predict different behaviors of people.

While little research has been done regarding media representations of the disabled, Cuddy and her colleagues help to clearly define why stereotypes of people with disabilities are inherently different than those of other disadvantaged groups, an important delineation to make for understanding why my model is different from Clark's model. These researchers discuss how there are very few groups that are seen as high on both the warmth and competence scales. These groups, known as "reference groups," include "ingroups (e.g., students) and societal prototype groups (e.g., Whites, middle class)," and these "are perceived to be both warm and competent" (Cuddy, et. al, 12). These "ingroups" and "reference groups" are the only ones that elicit almost purely positive perceptions from others.

All other groups tend to score high on one scale and low on the other or low on both scales, and are posited to provoke ambivalent perceptions or stereotypes. People with disabilities represent one of these other groups as they are perceived as high on the warmth scale, but low on the competence scale. Ergo, disabled persons are seen as friendly but not competitive, and elicit an indifferent stereotype in society. Because of this ambivalent perception, Cuddy, et. al

hypothesize that disabled persons are pitied in society instead of envied, and thus receive “active helping and passive neglect, aptly describing patronizing behavior” toward them and other pitied groups, such as the elderly (14). In contrast to those people who could be perceived as “competing for economic and educational resources,” people with disabilities are seen as very friendly, but almost always unable to compete with those reference or “ingroups” (Cuddy, et. al, 45).

The disabled are consistently on the high warmth, low competence scale for public perceptions and received much the same treatment across the board, characterized by “overtones of compassion, sympathy, and even tenderness” (Cuddy, et. al, 22). All of this treatment then leads to pitiful stereotypes filled with what Cuddy and her colleagues called “paternalistic prejudice” (in press, 55). Unlike other groups that fall under this “pity” title (such as the impoverished), persons with disabilities were almost exclusively seen as those who deserved pity and sympathy as they were victims of something they could not control. In their summary about pitiful stereotypes, Cuddy, et. al say that the disabled are “a group that deserves further study,” support for the fact that little research has been done to study media representations of the disabled so far (in press, 84).

### **Thesis Questions**

There were a few major questions I wanted answered with my research and findings, with my study being based in Cedric C. Clark’s 1969 model of the four stages of media representation for minority groups. His model included four distinct stages of media representations: non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect. To truly understand my thesis question, it is important to have a basic understanding of Clark’s model. The first section, non-representation,



is fairly self-explanatory as it includes programming that fails to include any character of the minority group studied. Ridicule, the second section of Clark's model, involves representations in which a minority character is used solely for derisive purposes; in this section, an African American, homosexual or any other minority person may exist only to be mocked or made fun of. Clark's third category is regulation and includes those representations of minority persons based on one or two prevailing (and usually negative) stereotypes of that minority group as a whole. In the case of homosexuals, a regulation representation might showcase a gay man who only acts flamboyantly and has torrid affairs, instead of a gay man who also happens to be a successful businessman and partner in a successful romantic relationship. Finally, the fourth stage of Clark's model is respect. The respect section of this model involves minority representations that are comparable to those representations of people from a majority group. In the final stage of Clark's model, it is common to find minority and majority characters working, living, and relating side-by-side with one another, signs that respect has truly been granted for that minority group.

This model has been used by other researchers to study representations of various minority groups, including homosexuals and American Indians. But some of my research (to be discussed in the Literature Review section) found that perceptions of disabled persons are inherently different from other minority groups, which suggests that representations of the disabled may not be able to be judged by the same model as other minority groups. Because of these findings, my first question primarily deals with the ability – or inability – of Clark's existing model to apply to representations of disabled persons. Is Clark's model of the four stages of media representation for minority groups even applicable for studying representations of disabled person? After some preliminary research, I deemed Clark's model inadequate for

depictions of the disabled, and found myself needing to revise the existing model. Therefore, my next major question asked how Clark's model needed to be revised given that it is inapplicable for the study of disabled characters.

Once I developed a revised version of Clark's model, I set about my content analysis which included certain stipulations: (1) character had been a part of the show since 2008 or was currently a character on the show, (2) the writers intended for the character in question to have a disability, and (3) the character was featured on a show aired on one of the network channels – NBC, CBS, ABC, FOX, or the CW (or CBS/Warner Brothers). With these parameters in place, I went about surveying the media content for information on the representations of the disabled, seeking to answer my final thesis questions. What does the revised model suggest about representations of disabled persons since 2008? Are the representations studied definitively placed in one category of the revised model or do characters tend to fit in multiple categories? These questions both serve to answer questions regarding the types of representations seen in the content analysis. Once I had answered these questions, I analyzed whether the revised model was successful and fitting for studying representations of disabled persons.

## **Revisions to Clark's Model**

### **Introduction:**

Clark's model for the four stages disadvantaged groups go through in terms of media representation served as the basis for my own research. This model has been used to study the representations of various minority groups, including homosexuals and American Indians. Because the perceptions are different (and therefore, the stereotypes are different), Clark's model had to be revised to fit this study more properly so that representations could more accurately be

judged. The model Clark created included four distinct stages: non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect. Each stage involved specific characteristics that led Clark – and others who used his model – to decide which category a representation fit into best. I made revisions to the first three stages of Clark’s model, including the reasoning behind each change as well as the different characteristics one might find in that type of representation. Respect, the final stage, was kept virtually untouched as it epitomized the apex of representation for any group, disadvantaged or otherwise.

### **Revisions – No section for non-representation:**

While Clark’s model included non-representation as its first stage, I chose to eliminate this category as I was engaging in a purposeful sampling content analysis as opposed to a random sampling one. In other applications of Clark’s model, the non-representation category served to list those shows that failed to include a character of the specific disadvantaged group studied (i.e., homosexuals or American Indians). Because my content analysis was very narrowly defined on characters with disabilities, this study did not measure the extent of non-representation of the disabled. Therefore, my first level of content analysis is pity.

### **Revisions – Ridicule to Pity**

The second category in Clark’s model is ridicule, but I found this title to be unsuitable for discussing representations of disabled persons because the stereotyping of the disabled as opposed to other disadvantaged groups is inherently different, and tends to shy away from mocking or ridiculing. As Cuddy, et. al explained, people with disabilities are not subjected to wholly negative perceptions because they score quite high on the warmth scale. Instead, disabled persons are more likely to elicit feelings of pity or caretaking. In application, someone

who may fear or abhor an African American or homosexual for being different will likely instead pity a person with a disability.

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines "disability" in a couple of ways that make it clear why others may feel pity, not fear or hatred, for a disabled person: "the *inability* to pursue an occupation because of a physical or mental *impairment*," and "a disqualification, restriction, or *disadvantage*."<sup>10</sup> These definitions support the idea that the stereotypes surrounding disabled persons are much more likely to promote sympathy, sorrow, or pity. The victim portion of the Roper's work also suggests that certain victim portrayals of people with disabilities involve the primary purpose of garnering support from viewers for a character.

For those reasons, I revised Clark's second category to "pity," and have included the following questions or characteristics that might deem a representation as "pitiful":

- Is the character only there to make people cringe?
- Does the character's presence neither add nor take away from the overall story?
- Is the character only there for humor or comedic relief?
- Is the character only there to make people sad or to elicit pity?
- Does the character's disability make him or her act in an unusual manner?
- Does the character's disability make other characters on the show uncomfortable?
- Is the representation wholly negative?
- Is the representation wholly pitiful based on the character's relationships with other characters on the show?
- Do other people make special arrangements for the character? Is the character considered a burden for others?

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<sup>10</sup> Merriam-Webster dictionary: definition for disability. Accessed: 9/1/2010. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disability>.

If at least 60% of a specific character's total characteristics fell into this category, that character was deemed a pitiful representation.

## **Revisions – Regulation to Limitations**

The third section of Clark's model is known as "regulation," and involves representations of disadvantaged groups that are based on one or two prevalent – and usually quite negative - stereotypes of that group. These stereotypes are used to employ heuristics or shortcuts in character development, so that characters are limited in their capacity to grow or change. I renamed this section "limitations," but it remains primarily the same as Clark's "regulation" stage, with one major exception: while the stereotypes of other disadvantaged groups in this category are almost wholly negative, the limiting stereotypes of disabled persons are almost wholly positive.

The hero portion of Roper's Stirling Media Institute study fits into this category as representations might only focus on the positive attributes or abilities of a disabled person. For instance, a hero portrayal might include a character that only ever succeeds but never fails, despite obstacles or challenges associated with his or her disability in the way. While these portrayals may seem positive, they actually limit the scope of the character by suggesting that people with disabilities *only* succeed, a trait untrue of any group.

For these reasons, I have renamed Clark's third stage from "regulation" (which suggests negative restraints placed on a group) to the more aptly-titled "limitations" (a name which suggests only that the group is held back in some way). These representations can be expressed through the following questions or characteristics:

- Is the character's disability his or her defining trait/characteristic?
- Does the character's story line revolve around his or her disability?

- Is the character's portrayal static or unchanging?
- Is the character unable to do many things other characters can do, such as have a significant other, drive a car, or be part of a team?
- Is the character only overcoming obstacles? Does the character seem unable to fail?
- Is the representation wholly positive?
- Does the character's part seem like tokenism, or representation solely for representation's sake?
- Is the character limited to a "so cute" or childlike portrayal?
- Does the character seem to be always helped, but never shown helping others?

If at least 60% of a specific character's total characteristics fell into this category, that character was deemed a limitations representation.

### **Revisions - Respect to 3-D character:**

Clark's final stage is known as "respect," which I have renamed "3-D character," purely for semantics sake. These two stages are almost exactly the same, and include representations that are the most respectful toward the disadvantaged group. A representation in this category would include a disabled character who blends in with other non-disabled characters, and is seen as an integral part of both the cast and plot lines. These representations would include both positive and negative traits, and would follow along the same lines of those "in-groups" such as middle-class Caucasians.

The "3-D character" category of my study might include the following questions or characteristics:

- Is the character well-rounded and dynamic? Do we see them change over the course of the show?
- Does the character have both good qualities *and* human shortcomings or flaws?
- Does the character perform daily tasks like other characters?
- Does the character not only overcome obstacles but have setbacks as well?
- Is the disability one of his or her traits, but not necessarily the defining one?
- Does the character have a good, productive job (if such would be expected based on the age or status of the character)?
- Does the character have many friends?
- Does the character have a significant other or has the character had a significant other during the course of the show?
- Does the character have a mode of transportation (i.e., can he or she drive a car, ride the bus, etc.)?
- Is the character a member of a team?
- Is the character shown helping others as well as being helped?
- Does the character embrace or show support to other minority groups?

If at least 60% of a specific character's total characteristics fell into this category, that character was deemed a 3-D character representation.

## **Methods**

### **Background:**

When I first decided to pursue a content analysis as my form of research, I had to decide on several matters, one of the first being which medium I would use. After some deliberation, I

opted to use television as the medium for my study because I felt that it had the most potential to both reach viewers and have enough content to pull from for the content analysis. I found support for this reasoning in Raley and Lucas's findings in the *Journal of Homosexuality*, one of the foundations for my own study. Raley and Lucas utilized Clark's model for their own research and chose to study prime-time television representations for the following reason:

“Research has found that people watch TV for entertainment and to acquire information. The pervasiveness of TV as a medium makes it a viable subject for research on the way a group is portrayed in the mass media at large. The representation of minority groups is of particular interest because these groups are often marginalized in society.”<sup>11</sup>

Television shows, especially those that come on during primetime hours, are particularly influential on people's perceptions of other groups, especially those groups that individuals may not have day-to-day contact with. However, it would be entirely too time-consuming to watch every single television show, so I narrowed my content analysis further to those representations of disabled characters exclusively on network television shows. With that being said, it is important to understand that non-representation was still a factor in this study, as only 14 total characters were selected for my research pool, an incredibly small fraction of the total characters on network television today. While I do not include a non-representation section in my model, it is clear that under-representation of the disabled is alive and well on current network television shows.

### **Methods – Selection of Characters:**

I decided a purposeful approach to sampling would be best as it would allow me to only look at shows that had characters with some types of disability portrayed. Using a random sampling would require looking at a much larger number of shows, many of which would not

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<sup>11</sup> Raley, Amber B. and Jennifer L. Lucas, PhD. *Stereotype or Success? Prime-Time Television's Portrayals of Gay Male, Lesbian, and Bisexual Characters*. *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 51(2) 2006, pp. 19-38.



have disabled characters, and could therefore, not be used for analysis at all. I decided to first do a general Google search on “characters with disabilities on TV shows currently.” My first couple of searches yielded several different sites that each had their own lists of characters with disabilities on television shows currently running. These sites are listed in the References section of my thesis and the characters studied for the content analysis can be found in Appendix A: Characters.

After my initial Google search for characters, I did some more in-depth research on each of the characters listed to make sure that they fit into the parameters of my study’s criteria. The first criterion of my study was that the character had been a part of a show either since 2008 or was currently a character on a show. The selection of this year was to coincide with the most recent revision of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which continues to be the most comprehensive piece of legislation for the rights of disabled persons. Using the revisions of the ADA also helped to serve as a societal indicator of the progress of the rights for disabled persons with the reasoning that real-world events might coincide with changes in media portrayals. The year stipulation also helped to create a timeline for my study, and make the quantity of media content easier to manage.

The second stipulation of my study was that the writers of the shows (to the best of my knowledge) intended for the character in question to have a disability. After compiling my list of disabled characters for each show, I researched the different websites for the individual shows, paying close attention to the character descriptions and plot overviews. These websites, specifically the character lists and plot summaries, revealed whether the writers of the show meant for the character in question to have a disability or not. Since my research was focusing on representations of disabled persons, it was important to make sure the characters studied were

actually supposed to have a disability, and not just be a little “off.” The final criterion for character selection, as stated earlier, was that the character’s show was featured on one of the network channels – NBC, CBS, ABC, FOX, or the CW (CBS/Warner Brothers). I specifically chose to study the network channels exclusively in the hopes of examining the shows with the potential to reach the most audience members, and therefore, affect the most opinions.

### **Methods - Character Disqualification:**

Before I began watching each of these shows for the content analysis, I researched exactly what disability each character was said to have. After I made this list of disabilities, I eliminated from the content analysis any character that was not presented as a disabled character. A character could be disqualified from the study for two reasons: (1) uncertainty regarding whether the character was actually written to have a disability; or (2) if his or her affliction is generally considered not a disability, but rather a medical condition. For example, Jerry Espenson, a character on *Boston Legal*, and Saul Holden, a character on *Brothers and Sisters*, were included in several of the lists I came across but were excluded from my content analysis. The character of Jerry has Alzheimer’s while Saul has HIV; certain schools of thought put these under the title of “disability,” but others say they are merely medical conditions. This study focuses only on those conditions strictly thought of as disabilities, such as a physical disability of being in a wheelchair, an intellectual disability such as Down syndrome, or a social disability such as anything on either the Autism or Asperger’s spectrums.<sup>12</sup>

For further clarification on the difference between a disability and a medical affliction or impairment, we can look toward certain groups that work exclusively with disabled persons. The Hill County Disabled Group defines impairment as “any *loss* . . . of psychological, physiological

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<sup>12</sup> These disabilities are further discussed in Appendix B.

or anatomical structure or function” while a disability is “any restriction or lack . . . of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.”<sup>13</sup> The delineation between a *loss* of function and the *inability* to carry out a function is important in understanding the difference between an affliction and a true disability. Another group, Disabled World, lists several groups of disabilities: mobility and physical, spinal cord, vision, hearing, and cognitive or learning disabilities.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities elaborates on the difference between a disability and a medical affliction or impairment. The AAIDD states that intellectual and physical disabilities are the manifestations of certain diagnoses: Autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and fetal alcohol syndrome; intellectual disabilities, unlike medical afflictions, are not caused by diseases or conditions later on in life, but are present from birth or a very young age.<sup>15</sup> It is vitally important to understand the difference between a medical affliction or impairment and a true disability in order to understand my reasoning for eliminating the characters of Jerry Espenson and Saul Holden from the content analysis.

### **Methods – Characteristics and Content Analysis:**

Once I had excluded these two characters from the pool, I was left with 14 characters that met all of the study’s criteria. I watched three episodes per character, scrutinizing each using my newly revised version of Clark’s model. In my updated version of Clark’s model, I came up with 31 different characteristics that fell into three categories: Pity, Limitations, and 3-D. For each category of my model, I developed different characteristics that would help to distinguish

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<sup>13</sup> *What is a disability?* Hill County Disabled Group. <http://hcdg.org/definition.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> *Types of Disabilities*. Disabled Word. <http://www.disabled-world.com/disability/types/>.

<sup>15</sup> *FAQ on Intellectual Disability: What Causes Intellectual Disability?* American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. [http://www.aaidd.org/content\\_104.cfm](http://www.aaidd.org/content_104.cfm).

between various representations. These characteristics and the reasoning behind them were discussed in the section on the revisions made to Clark's model.

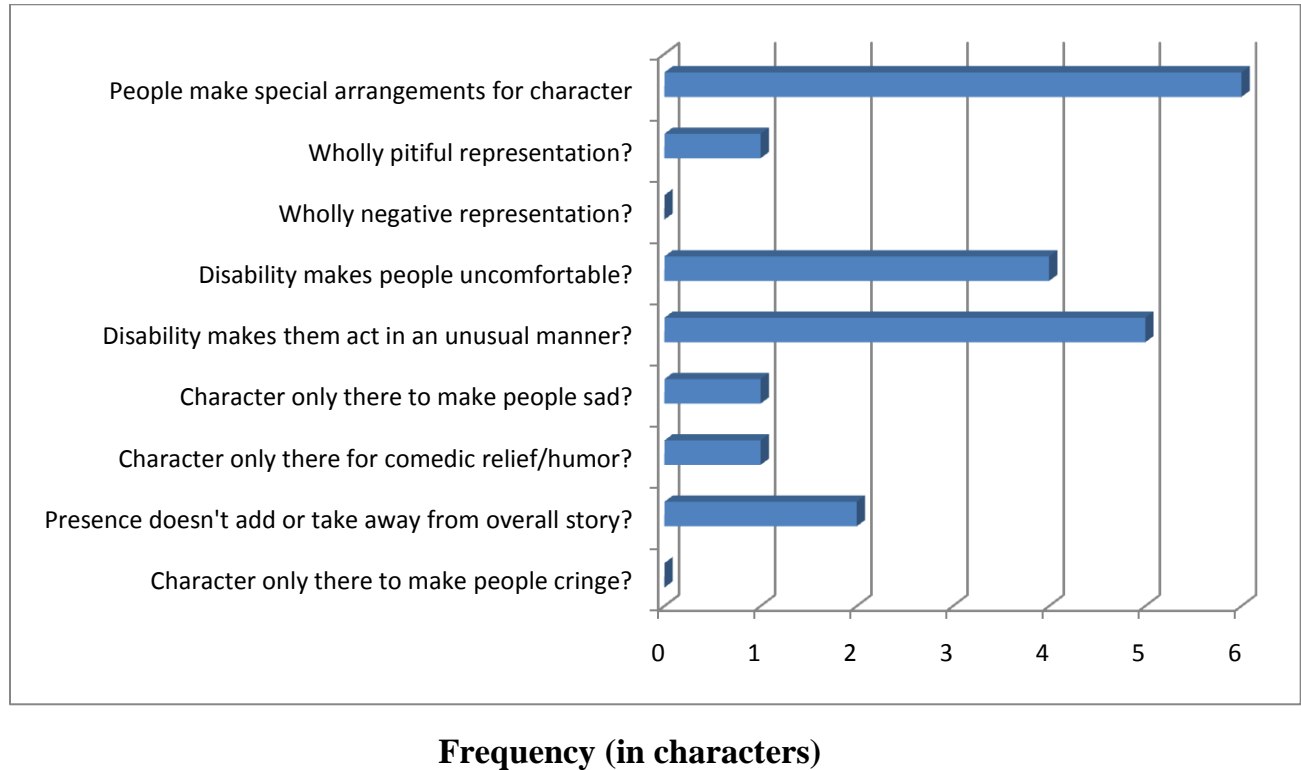
For the content analysis itself, I watched three episodes for each character. I created a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with the characters listed on the X-axis and the various categorical characteristics on the Y-axis. I had the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet open on my computer and as each episode went on, I checked off any of the characteristics that appeared. I repeated this method for all 14 characters until I had the full list of characteristics associated with each of the characters.

### **Methods – Character Categorization**

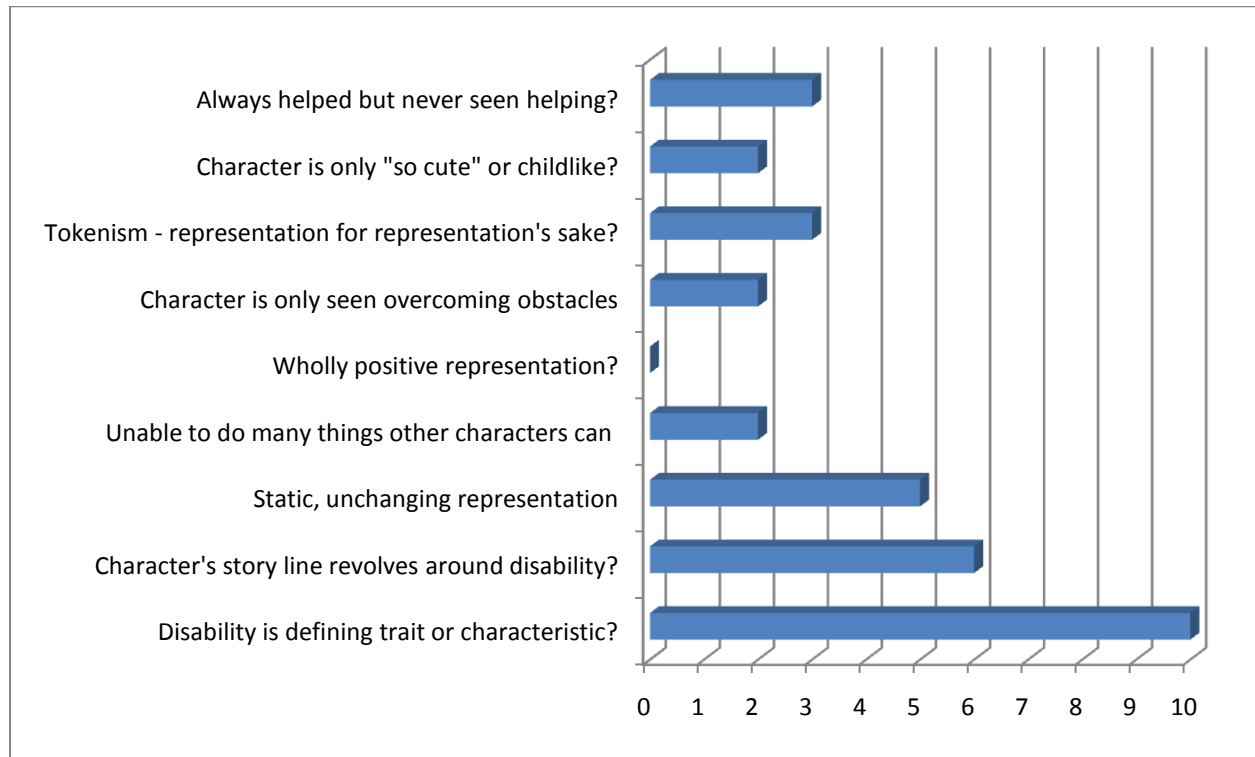
Once I had the list of all the characteristics that appeared for each character, I went about separating the characters into the different categories of representations. As stated earlier, there were 31 total characteristics divided into three different representation categories: Pity, Limitations, and 3-D. Because there were not an equal number of characteristics for each category, I decided to use a percentage of characteristics per character in order to assign each character to a category. Each character must have had at least 60% of his or her total characteristics in one specific category to be deemed that type of representation. The decision to use 60% as my baseline measurement for character categorization was purely arbitrary; the percentage could have just as easily been two-thirds or three-fourths. If a character had less than 60% in a single category, and had 30% - 59% of his or her total characteristics in two different categories, he or she was deemed a combination representation between those two categories.

## Results

**Chart: 1A**                      **Frequency of “Pity” Characteristics**



This chart illustrates the frequency that the different “pity” characteristics were found throughout the content analysis. There are nine different questions or characteristics listed under the “pity” category, two of which were never seen in my study: (1) character is only there to make people cringe and (2) the representation is wholly negative. The remaining seven characteristics were found at least once in the different portrayals, with one found as many as six different times. These characteristics are those that can best be likened to those in the “ridicule” stage of Clark’s model of the four stages of representation for minority groups.

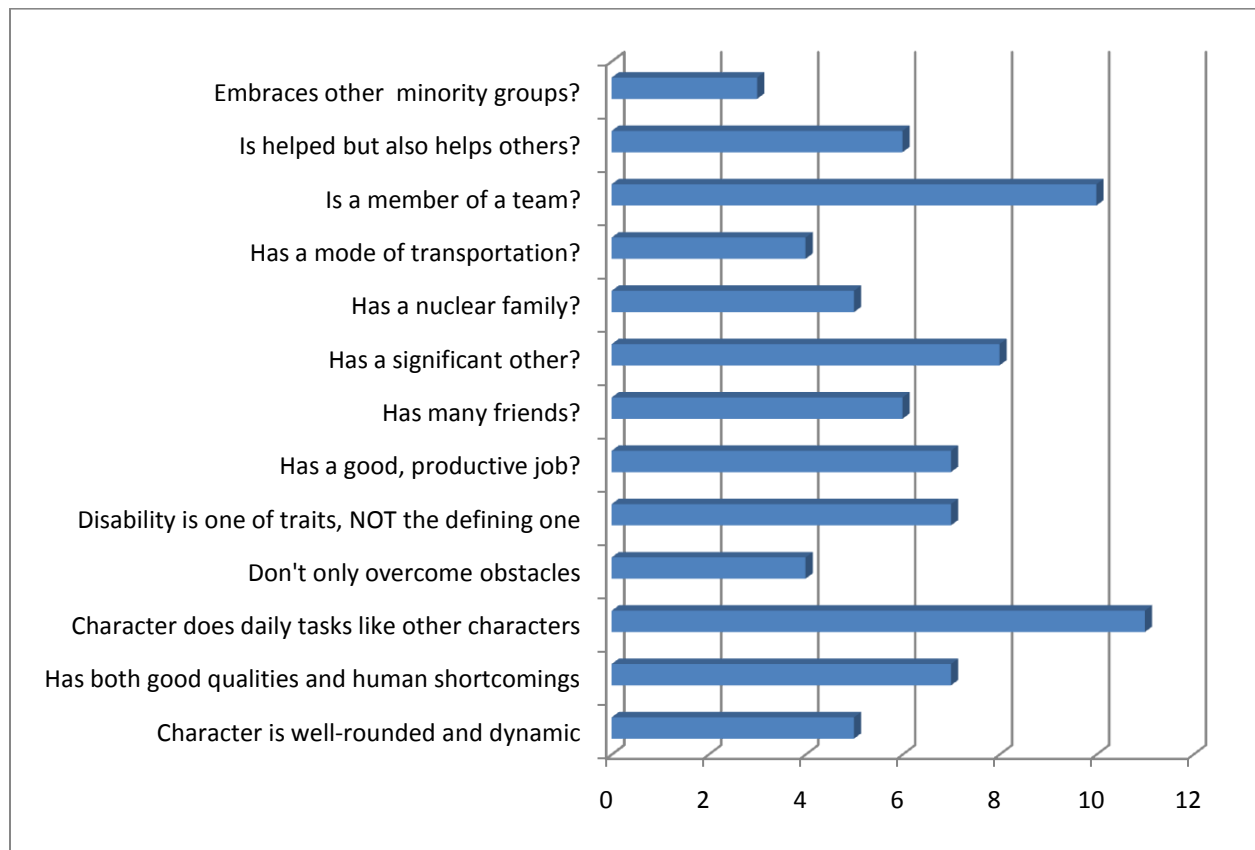
**Chart: 1B****Frequency of “Limitations” Characteristics**

**Frequency (in characters)**

This chart illustrates the frequency of “limitation” characteristics seen during my content analysis. There are nine different characteristics for this category, one of which was never seen throughout the course of my study: (1) the representation was wholly positive. All of the other characteristics in this category were seen at least twice, with the “disability is the defining trait” characteristic seen in 10 of the 14 total characters studied. These characteristics are those that can best be likened to those in the “regulation” stage of Clark’s model of the four stages of representation for minority groups.

**Chart: 1C**

**Frequency of “3-D Character” Characteristics**

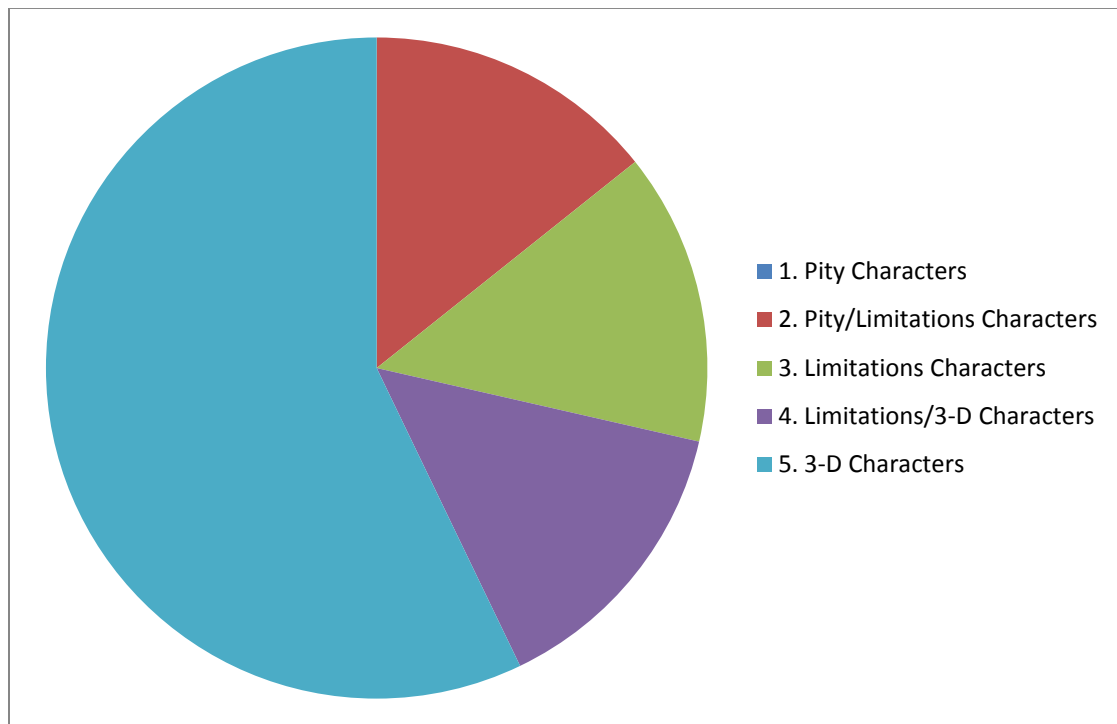


**Frequency (in characters)**

This chart illustrates the frequency that the “3-D character” characteristics were seen throughout my content analysis. There were 13 total characteristics in this category, with all of these showing up in at least three characters. Two of the 13 characteristics were seen in at least 10 of the 14 total characters: (1) the character does daily tasks like other characters and (2) the character is a member of a team. These characteristics are those that can best be likened to those in the “respect” stage of Clark’s model of the four stages of representation for minority groups.

**Chart: 2A**

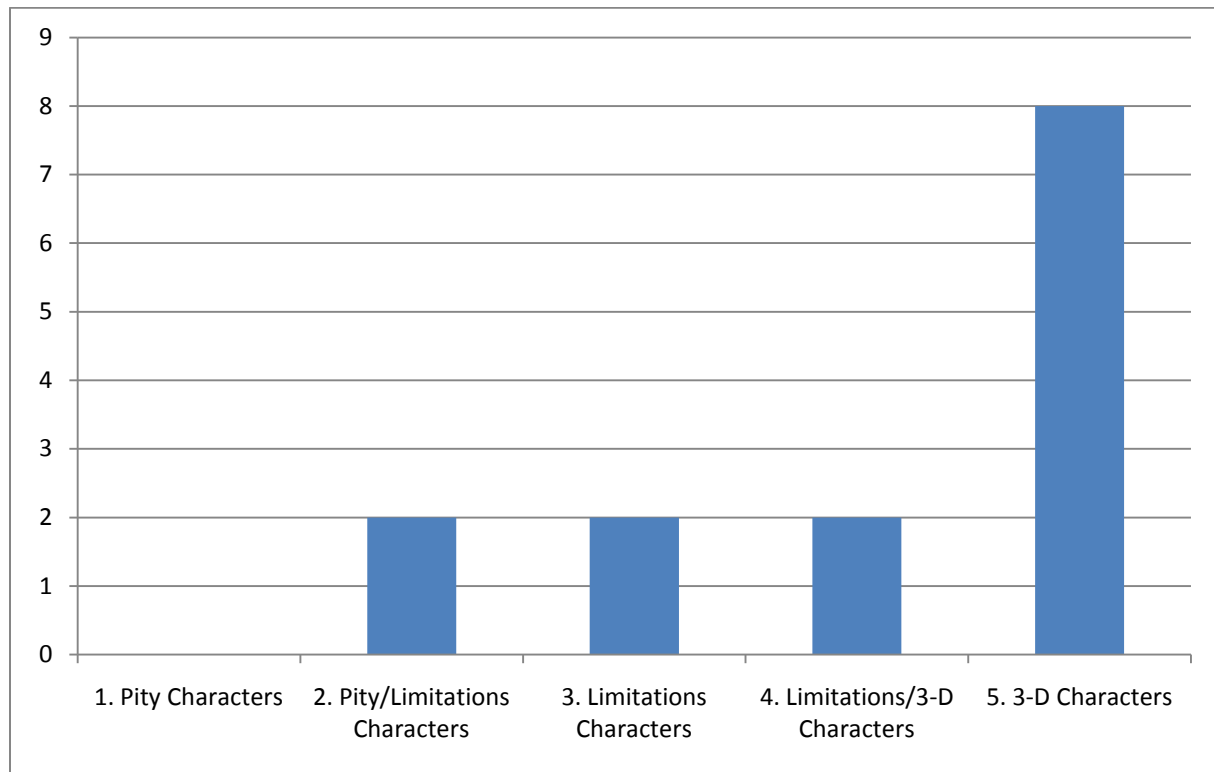
**Breakdown of Character Representations**



This chart illustrates the number of characters that were found in each of the categories of my revised model. A character needed to have 60% of his or her total characteristics in a specific category to be deemed that type of representation. If a character had less than 60% in a single category, and had 30% - 59% of his or her total characteristics in two different categories, he or she was deemed a combination representation between those two categories.

As the chart shows, the majority of the 14 characters studied fell into the “3-D character” category; in total, 8 of the 14 characters (or 57.1%) were deemed “3-D” characters. There were equal numbers of characters that fell into the middle three categories with two characters (or 14.3%) each: (1) “pity/limitations,” (2) “limitations,” and (3) “limitations/3-D character.” None of the 14 characters studied fell wholly into the “pity” category.



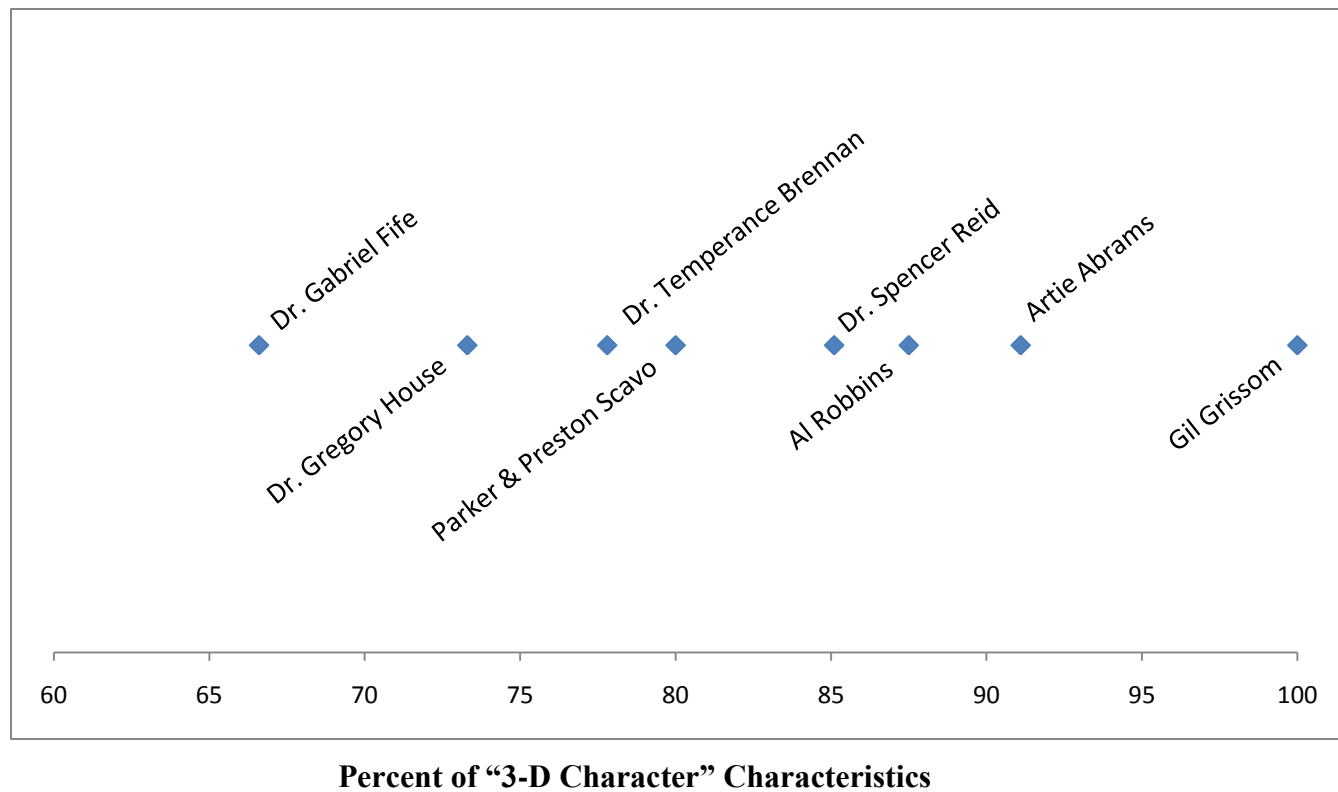
**Chart: 2B****Number of Characters in Each Category**

**Frequency (in characters)**

Like the previous chart, this table illustrates the breakdown of the total characters into the various categories of representations. This chart very clearly shows just how many of the 14 characters fell into the different levels of representation. None of the 14 portrayals studied were completely pitiful representations, meaning that no character had 60% of his or her total characteristics in the “pity” category. There were two characters each in the three middle categories: (1) “pity/limitation,” (2) “limitation,” and (3) “limitation/3-D characters.” Finally, eight of the 14 characters studied were included in the “3-D character” category, meaning that at least 60% of their total characteristics were those in the “3-D character” section. Of these eight “3-D Character” representations, percentages of “3-D character” characteristics ranged from as

low as 66.6% to 100% of the total characters which suggests that certain characters are more “3-D” than others. The “3-D character” representations are more thoroughly discussed below.

**Chart 3A**                      **Continuum of “3-D character” Representations**  
**(Least 3-D to Most 3-D)**



This chart shows the continuum of “3-D character” representations from the least 3-D to the most 3-D, based on the percentage of “3-D character” characteristics found for each representation. Dr. Gabriel Fife is the least “3-D” with 66.6% of his total characteristics falling under the “3-D character” category; Gil Grissom is the most “3-D” with 100% of his total characteristics falling under the “3-D character” category. I felt that it was important to include this graphic to help delineate between the “3-D character” representations since eight of the 14 characters studied fell into this category.

## **Discussion of Results**

The previous section focused on the quantitative results of my study: the frequency of the characteristics used, the number of characters found in each of the revised model's categories, and the continuum of "3-D character" representations. This data is vitally important as it provides the information needed to engage in a qualitative discussion about the types of representations seen and the efficacy of the revised model to analyze disabled portrayals. In this section, I will address both of these qualitative subjects by looking at the individual characters in a more in-depth way, and also delving into whether or not the revised model was effective for judging media representations of disabled persons. The final part of this section will touch briefly on what both the quantitative and qualitative data say about the status of persons with disabilities in the media today.

### **Non-representation as a factor:**

In the section on revisions made to Clark's model, I established that my first change to the existing model was to eliminate his first section of "non-representation." I supported this decision by acknowledging that my study engaged in purposeful, rather than random sampling, and therefore, I was only seeking those network television shows that included a disabled character. I originally thought that non-representation would not be a factor in my research since all of the characters I studied had some type of disability. However, I realized that even with the "non-representation" section eliminated from my study, non-representation was still a factor in my research. Of the hundreds – and possibly thousands – of characters on network television shows, only 14 had some type of physical, social, or intellectual disability. And, even after accounting for the disabled characters eliminated from my study for various reasons, there is still a huge disparity between the numbers of network television characters and disabled characters;

this disparity proves that non-representation of the disabled remains an issue today, despite how advanced certain disabled representations are.

### **“Pity/Limitations” Characters:**

Two of the 14 characters studied fell into the combination category of “pity/limitations,” meaning that 30% - 59% of his or her characteristics fell into each of the “pity” and “limitations” categories. Jean Sylvester, a minor character on FOX’s *Glee*, exhibited eight total characteristics, four of which were in the “pity” category and four of which were in the “limitations” category. Max Braverman, a major character on NBC’s *Parenthood*, also exhibited eight total characteristics, three in the “pity” category and four in the “limitations” category.

Jean Sylvester is portrayed by Robin Trocki, an actress with Down syndrome, and has been featured in about a fourth of *Glee*’s total episodes. Her portrayal is a completely static one, as her story line always revolves around the fact that she is disabled. Jean relies solely on the help of others to live, residing in an assisted living home for disabled adults. Her character elicits pity from the audience, and is present mostly to humanize the character of her sister Sue, who is often seen as cold and calculating, unless she is with Jean.

Max Braverman is afflicted with Asperger’s (or a form of social Autism), and is portrayed by Max Burkholder, a 13-year-old actor who is not actually disabled. His representation includes characteristics that almost exclusively fall under the “pity” and “limitations” categories. Max relies heavily on other people and even has a permanent helper in multiple episodes. His behavior is socially unfit and he makes others uncomfortable by his words and actions. Max consistently acts in an uncouth manner and has to be told things several times before he understands. He also does not adapt to change well, especially evident in an

intense tantrum where he destroys his room after being told his cousin can no longer sleep over at his house one night.

Both Jean and Max embody what I envisioned as a “pity/limitations” representation as their disability is their defining trait and both characters remain static throughout the show. We don’t really see either of them grow as individuals, and they each serve a limited purpose: Jean is there mostly to humanize her much-disliked sister and Max almost always serves as a disruption for family conversations and situations. The characters each exhibited some of the most striking “pity” characteristics, such as being considered a burden on others and people consistently have to make special arrangements for them. Neither character engages in daily tasks like other majority group characters or is seen as having friends, key characteristics to suggest a character has made it to the “3-D character” category. While I only watched three episodes for each of these characters, I would imagine that their portrayals would remain quite static throughout the duration of each of these shows.

### **“Limitations” Characters:**

Of the 14 characters studied in this content analysis, two of them fell into the “limitations” category, meaning that at least 60% of their total characteristics were found in the “limitations” stage of the revised model. Becky Jackson, a minor but recurring character on FOX’s *Glee*, exhibited five total characteristics, three of which fell in the “limitations” category. Brick Heck, a major character on ABC’s *The Middle*, exhibited ten total characteristics, six of which fell in the “limitations” category. Both of these characters had 60% of their characteristics in the “limitations” stage of the revised model.

Becky Jackson is played by Lauren Potter, an actress with Down syndrome. Her character is a part of most *Glee* episodes, but always in a minor and limited role. Of the five total characteristics she exhibited, three were in the “limitations” category of the revised model. The most obvious characteristic is she is “so cute or childlike,” seeming smaller or younger than people who are supposed to be her high school peers. Her story line most usually revolves around the fact that she is disabled, and she remains a static character throughout the episodes. However, her representation does include one “3-D character” characteristic as she is a member of the high school cheerleading squad; but, we never actually see her perform routines and there was much skepticism among other characters revolving around the decision to make her part of the team. Becky embodies a “limitations” representation because her disability is often her defining trait, and her portrayal is static in nature.

Brick Heck is a main character on NBC’s comedy *The Middle*, and is played by Atticus Shaffer. Brick, afflicted with a moderate case of Asperger’s syndrome, exhibited ten total characteristics from the revised model. Of the ten characteristics found, six were from the “limitations” category, placing him within the parameters of a “limitations” representation. Brick’s portrayal fits in quite nicely with what I anticipated from a “limitations” representation: his story line revolves around his disability and the fact that he is a little different from other kids, or that he is “special” as his parents say. His unusual “quirks” are his defining traits, and his representation remains static throughout all the episodes surveyed. Brick’s portrayal does include the “3-D character” characteristic of performing daily tasks as he goes to school every day with both disabled and non-disabled children alike. Brick also exhibits two characteristics found in the “pity” category of the revised model: his disability makes other people uncomfortable at times, and his disability makes him act in an unusual manner, primarily in his

whispering out loud often as he repeats what others are saying. A final important caveat of the “limitations” representation is that it may not be negative so much as appropriate for certain types of disabilities. For instance, it may not be likely or even appropriate for a character with severe Autism or Down syndrome to have a “3-D character” representation; instead, such a character may be more apt to fit quite realistically in the “limitations” category. If a severely disabled character is more likely to embody a “limitations” representation, is “limitations” a negative category, or simply a realistic one?

### **“Limitations/3-D character” Representations:**

Two of the 14 total characters studied in this content analysis fell under the combination “limitations/3-D character” group of representations, meaning that 30% - 59% of their characteristics fell into each the “limitations” and “3-D character” categories of the revised model. Lieutenant Joe Swanson, a major character on FOX’s hit cartoon *Family Guy*, exhibited 15 total characteristics from the model, five of which fell in the “limitations” category and eight of which fell in the “3-D character” category. Dr. Virginia Dixon, a minor character on ABC’s *Grey’s Anatomy*, exhibited 13 total characteristics from the model, six of which were found in the “limitations” category, and four of which were found in the “3-D character” category.

Lieutenant Joe Swanson is confined to a wheelchair because of a spinal cord injury, and is voiced by Patrick Warburton. While his portrayal includes characteristics that fall in all three categories of the revised model, the majority of his traits are found in the “limitations” and “3-D character” stages. Lieutenant Swanson’s story lines tend to revolve around his physical disability and he is often portrayed as the token disabled character. In fact, in one episode screened during the content analysis, he is unable to go to the spa with his friends, so they try to find another disabled person to take Swanson’s place.

But while there were some obvious limiting characteristics to his portrayal, Lieutenant Swanson's representation still included a notable number of "3-D character" characteristics as well. Lieutenant Swanson is a well-rounded character who is able to participate in the daily activities of other "ingroup" characters on the show. He is a respected police officer, but also struggles with anger and gambling issues, proof that his disability doesn't limit him to a purely positive representation. As one of the main character's best friends, Lieutenant Swanson gets along well with others, and is also married with children.

Dr. Virginia Dixon appeared in only three episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* as a respected cardiothoracic surgeon with Asperger's syndrome. Dr. Dixon is played by Mary McDonnell, an actress who is not actually disabled. Her portrayal included characteristics from all three categories of the revised model, most of which were found in the "limitations" and "3-D character" stages. Dr. Dixon's representation does include some significant "3-D character" characteristics in that she has a good, productive job as an impressive surgeon, and she works as a member of a team of doctors trying to treat and cure patients of various ailments. She has both positive and negative attributes in that she is very intelligent and skilled as a surgeon, but she also struggles to work with others and is very socially awkward.

While Dr. Dixon's representation included a respectable number of "3-D character" characteristics, the highest number of traits seen for her portrayal fall under the "limitations" category of the revised model. From the very beginning, her disability is her defining trait; even before she is introduced to her new colleagues, she is described as different or a "little off." Dr. Dixon has trouble engaging in any form of conversation with others and people are often reluctant to work with her as she doesn't understand how to communicate with or act around other people in social contexts. Dr. Dixon is often very direct and even robotic in her dealings



with patients, and is unable to relate to patients on any level other than a medical one. Because her character only appeared on three episodes, her representation was static throughout, and we do not see her deviate from her socially inept ways.

Both Lieutenant Swanson and Dr. Dixon embody what I would have expected from a “limitations/3-D character” representation. They include certain advanced aspects in terms of their jobs and membership on teams, and also their inclusion of both positive and negative attributes, but are limited in other significant ways. Both these characters are defined by their disabilities and are oftentimes portrayed as the token disabled character, or in other words, representation for representation’s sake. Their story lines tend to revolve around their struggles with their disabilities, and they are unable to truly become advanced enough to compare with other “ingroup” characters on their respective shows. As “limitations/3-D character” representations, the negative characteristics found in both Lieutenant Swanson’s and Dr. Dixon’s representations are limiting enough to keep them from being more advanced or mainstream characters.

### **“3-D” Characters: Least 3-D to Most 3-D**

Eight of the 14 total characters studied were characterized as “3-D character” representations. These eight characters had varying percentages of “3-D character” characteristics, and will therefore, be discussed on an individual basis. The final chart in the results section placed these eight characters on a “3-D character” continuum, based solely on quantitative results. This section will take those quantitative results and discuss their findings in a more qualitative way, highlighting specific characteristics seen in the portrayals, and what these representations may mean in the broader discussion of media depictions of the disabled.

## **1. Dr. Gabriel Fife:**

Dr. Gabriel Fife represents the least advanced of the “3-D character” representations in my content analysis. Dr. Fife is a recurring character on ABC’s *Private Practice*, and is portrayed by Michael Patrick Thornton, an actor who is actually confined to a wheelchair because of a spinal cord injury. Of the total characteristics found for Dr. Fife’s portrayal, 66.6% of the traits came from the “3-D character” stage of the model. While Dr. Fife’s character is sometimes seen as a burden to his friends and colleagues, and is often helped by others (characteristics that fall under the “pity” and “limitations” categories respectively), his representation is still primarily a “3-D character” one. He works as a member of a team of doctors in a medical clinic, has numerous traits other than his disability, and is involved in romantic relationships. While he is certainly not the most advanced character studied in this content analysis, his portrayal is one of both successes and failures, an important characteristic of a “3-D character” representation.

## **2. Dr. Gregory House:**

Non-disabled actor Hugh Laurie portrays Dr. Gregory House, the title character of FOX’s hit drama *House, M.D.* who is afflicted with both a debilitating nerve condition that makes him walk with a cane, and who also falls somewhere on the Autism spectrum. Of the total characteristics found for Dr. House’s portrayal, 73.3% of them fell in the “3-D character” category of the revised model. The character of Dr. House is quite an unusual one; while he exhibits 11 of the 13 “3-D character” characteristics (one of the highest number for this study), he also includes three traits from the “pity” stage and one trait from the “limitations” stage of the model. In terms of the “pity” stage, Dr. House intentionally acts in a socially unfit manner that puts people in awkward situations. He also says and does things to make people upset, including those

considered to be his best friends. The final trait for “pity” is that Dr. House receives special treatment a number of times to compensate for his unusual (and oftentimes, inappropriate) actions. Under the “limitations” section, we see that one of his defining characteristics is his crotchety demeanor and unsuitable remarks which can be attributed to both his physical and intellectual disabilities.

While portions of Dr. House’s representation fall under the “pity” and “limitations” categories, he is undoubtedly a “3-D” character. His amazing intelligence and efficacy at solving medical mysteries makes him one of the best doctors at the hospital in which he works. He is also not only a member, but the leader of a respected team, and has multiple love interests throughout the show. While his unwillingness to conform to social norms and ineptitude to respectively deal with patients are constants throughout the show, we do see him change as a dynamic character in some big ways: when his best friend’s love interest is dying on the show, he expresses compassion and sympathy for him; and, he is able to transform from a Vicodin addict to a clean individual. Another important characteristic of a “3-D character” representation is that the individual is allowed to have faults or setbacks; while Dr. House almost always solves the medical case on hand, he is wrong several times before reaching the right diagnosis.

### **3. Dr. Temperance Brennan:**

Played by Emily Deschanel, Dr. Temperance Brennan is the lead character on FOX’s drama *Bones*. Dr. Brennan, a forensic anthropologist afflicted with Asperger’s syndrome, exhibits nine total characteristics from the revised model, seven (or 77.8%) of which are found in the “3-D character” category. Her portrayal does include a characteristic each from both the “pity” and “limitation” categories. In terms of “pity,” Dr. Brennan has a difficult time understanding many popular culture references, making her socially awkward much of the time. And while she is

very intelligent and adept at her job, her inability to relate to others in a social way is occasionally her defining trait, a characteristic from the “limitations” category.

While Dr. Brennan’s portrayal includes characteristics from the first two stages of the revised model, her representation falls almost exclusively in the “3-D character” category. She performs daily tasks like many other characters, is a member of a forensics team that works to solve murder cases, and has romantic relationships with others on the show. While her social awkwardness sometimes makes it difficult for her to relate with others, Dr. Brennan is able to carry on successful friendships throughout the course of the show. She is quite successful at her work as a forensic anthropologist, playing an integral role in the solving of various murder cases. Finally, Dr. Brennan exhibits both positive traits and human shortcomings, making her a well-rounded and dynamic character.

#### **4. Parker and Preston Scavo:**

Parker and Preston Scavo are minor characters on ABC’s *Desperate Housewives*, who suffer from ADHD, or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. The twin brothers are played by Joshua Logan Moore and Max Carver, and are similar enough in nature to group their representations together. Of the ten total characteristics found for their portrayals, eight of these fell under the “3-D character” category of the revised model, with the other two traits falling under the “limitations” category. In terms of “limitations” characteristics, the twins’ defining trait at times is their unharnessed energy, which leads them to participate in some troublesome antics. Also, Parker and Preston’s story lines tend to revolve around the messes they find themselves in as a result of their hyperactivity and inability to focus.

The twins certainly include traits that could lead to a more limiting representation; however, the majority (or 80%) of the total characteristics found for them comes from the third category of

the model, making them “3-D character” representations. Like other teenagers and young adults, they go to school, play sports, hang out with their friends, etc. They are able to participate in successful platonic and romantic relationships throughout the course of the show, with Preston becoming engaged in one of the shows screened during the content analysis. While they are at times most known for their abundance of energy and lack of focus, they also have the positive attributes of being good sons and big brothers. Both Parker and Preston are dynamic in nature, and we seem them mature as the show goes on, a key characteristic of a “3-D character” representation.

## **5. Dr. Spencer Reid:**

Dr. Spencer Reid, a main character on CBS’s hit series *Criminal Minds*, falls somewhere on the Autism spectrum, primarily exhibiting Asperger symptoms. He is portrayed by Matthew Gray Gubler, an actor who is not disabled. On the “3-D character” continuum, Dr. Reid falls somewhere in the middle of the characters with 85% of his total characteristics falling within the “3-D character” category of the revised model. However, Dr. Reid’s representation does include one characteristic from each the “pity” and the “limitation” categories. From the “pity” stage, his Asperger’s makes him speak or act in a socially awkward manner sometimes, and he usually has a hard time understanding human emotions or social norms. In terms of the “limitation” category characteristic, Dr. Reid’s defining trait in most episodes is his incredible intelligence, something often associated with Asperger’s syndrome.

But while Dr. Reid’s representation includes characteristics from the first two stages of the revised model, he exhibits one of the highest numbers of “3-D character” characteristics in the entire content analysis; in his portrayal, 11 of the 13 “3-D character” traits were found. Dr. Reid is an extremely dynamic character as a member of the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit that

profiles serial killers and other criminals. At times, he is a leader of the team; in other instances, he is merely a colleague or a follower. He works well with his colleagues as a member of the crime-solving team, and develops close friendships with many he comes in contact with. Dr. Reid is also seen successfully flirting and starting a relationship with an attractive woman during one of the episodes screened during the content analysis. Finally, his portrayal is one that includes successes and failures, an important trait of a “3-D character” representation as it brings the disabled character past the stereotype of always being pitied by others.

## **6. Al Robbins:**

As the adept coroner on CBS’s hit crime-solving drama *CSI*, Al Robbins works to figure out who has committed a crime despite being physically disabled. Robbins is played by Robert David Hall, an actor who is actually disabled as a below-the-knee amputee. The content analysis found eight total characteristics from the revised model in Robbins’ portrayal, seven (or 87.5%) of which fell under the “3-D character” category. His representation did include one characteristic from the “limitations” stage of the model, as Robbins’ character is somewhat static – he is most always just seen for being the coroner.

Apart from this one “limitations” characteristic, the portrayal of Al Robbins is a quite advanced one. His disability is accentuated by an obvious limp, but little (if any) plot time or dialogue is spent focusing on this physical limitation. Robbins is seen as an expert coroner, and is a vital member of the *CSI* team in solving murder cases; his ability to ascertain injuries, causes of death, and other information makes him an invaluable colleague. He works well with others in the lab and has friends outside of the *CSI* group. Robbins is also involved in romantic relationships throughout the course of the show. His plot, dialogue, and air time are not spent on

his disability, but rather what he can contribute in his work, an important characteristic of a “3-D character” representation.

## **7. Artie Abrams:**

As one of the founding members of the glee club in FOX’s extremely popular comedy *Glee*, Artie Abrams is a critical character to the show’s success. He is confined to a wheelchair because of a spinal cord injury, and is played by Kevin McHale, an actor who is not actually disabled. There were 11 total characteristics found in the revised model for the character of Artie Abrams, ten (or 91%) of which fell under the “3-D character” category. The one other characteristic is that his story line revolves around his disability in certain episodes, a trait under the “limitations” stage of the model.

While Artie Abrams’ representation does include a “limitations” characteristic, the majority of his traits fall under the “3-D character” category. Artie is a member of multiple teams in his high school, as a singer in the glee club and a football player. He gets along well with his classmates and fellow club members, and engages in two different romantic relationships in the episodes screened for the content analysis. We see Artie participate in the same activities as his non-disabled counterparts, and watch him mature as the show progresses. Another notable trait of Artie is that he embraces and supports other disadvantaged groups, including a pregnant teen, a homosexual, and an African American, an important characteristic of an advanced representation. The dynamic and ever-evolving character of Artie Abrams lends itself quite aptly to a “3-D character” representation.

## **Gil Grissom:**

Of all the characters studied in this content analysis, Gil Grissom is the most advanced, or the most “3-D,” of all the characters. Grissom is a character afflicted with hearing loss on CBS’s hit

drama *CSI*, and is played by William Petersen. He exhibits 12 total characters from the revised model, all of which are found in the “3-D character” category; this number is both the highest percentage and highest total number of “3-D character” characteristics found in the entire content analysis. Grissom serves as the leader of the Las Vegas Crime Scene Investigation (CSI) team, where he works with others to solve murder cases by examining and analyzing the evidence found. He enjoys strong, positive relationships with his colleagues, his friends, his family, and his romantic interests. By helping other families with disabilities on the show (primarily those related to hearing loss such as he has), Grissom truly embodies what Cuddy, et. al referred to as an “ingroup” character, or one that is both well-liked and well-rounded (12).

While Gil Grissom is the most advanced character studied in this content analysis, there is one important caveat of his individual representation to mention. All of his characteristics fell under the “3-D character” category of the model; but there was an episode of *CSI* that fell outside the study’s parameters in which Grissom’s hearing disability was the focus of his story line, a characteristic part of the “limitations” category. In “The Accused is Entitled,” Grissom is put on trial to serve as an expert witness in the prosecution of a murder suspect whose defense attorney knows about his hearing loss. The defense attorney has already discredited Grissom’s colleagues by using personal information against them, and plans to hinder Grissom by speaking very softly so that he cannot hear her questions. Grissom has to ask her to repeat the question three times so that he can read her lips enough to know how to answer the question. In the end, he is able to overcome his disability and the defendant is rightfully put away for the crime he committed. This particular episode, while extremely pertinent, was from a season prior to 2008 and was therefore, not used for the quantitative part of the content analysis. However, the episode is one



in which Grissom's disability is center-stage so it seemed important enough to note for the qualitative part of this study.

### **“3-D Character” Recap:**

While the eight characters that were deemed “3-D character” representations varied in how advanced they were, they all epitomized in some way what I expected from a “3-D character” portrayal. None of these portrayals may have included all 13 characteristics from the “3-D character” stage of the model, but they all had similar traits that led to them being deemed advanced representations. All eight of the characters in this category were dynamic in some way and included both positive and negative attributes. They were not limited by their disabilities, but able to find work in good, productive jobs, and also engage in meaningful friendships and romantic relationships. None of these characters were defined by their disabilities or seen as a burden to other characters on the show. And, many of these eight characters embraced other minority groups, a sign that they are respected members of the “ingroup.” While they all included different percentages of “3-D character” characteristics, all eight of these characters were great representations of what an advanced disabled portrayal can look like.

### **Did the Model Work?**

While this discussion section has focused so far on the categorizations of the characters studied in my content analysis, another important part of the qualitative discussion must focus on whether or not my revised model was successful in studying media representations of the disabled. My revised version of Clark's model for the four stages of representations for minority groups included 31 different characteristics that were screened for during my content analysis. These 31 characteristics were divided into three distinct categories of representation: nine characteristics in the “pity” category, nine characteristics in the “limitation” category, and 13

characteristics in the “3-D character” category. To see if the revised model was truly efficacious in studying media representations of disabled persons, we must look at which characteristics were never seen, which were seen only once, and which were seen most often throughout the content analysis.

### **Characteristics Never Seen:**

There were three of the 31 different characteristics that were never seen throughout the course of my study: (1) character is only there to make people cringe, (2) the representation is wholly negative, and (3) the representation is wholly positive. After analyzing my results, it makes sense that these three characteristics would not be seen as they were very polarized one way or the other. The “character is only there to make people cringe” characteristic is not only extremely negative, but it also contradicts somewhat with the ambivalent representations hypothesized by Cuddy, et. al in their study of warmth and competence levels of different minority groups. A truly cringe-worthy representation simply does not align with the idea that a portrayal of a disabled person would reflect pity rather than ridicule.

The other two characteristics never seen are both similar and very different all at the same time. Both “the representation is wholly negative” and “the representation is wholly positive” reflect portrayals that are completely on one side of the spectrum. As none of the characters studied in the content analysis wholly fell into just one of the categories (with the exception of Gil Grissom), it would make sense that neither of these characteristics was ever seen. The character who was deemed the most “pitiful” representation included characteristics from multiple categories in the model; and, Gil Grissom, the one character whose characteristics all fell in the “3-D character” category had both positive and negative attributes, a key

characteristics of a “3-D character” representation. While these characteristics represent opposite ends of the representation spectrum, they are similar in that they assume that a portrayal would be completely centered on either negative or positive characteristics, something that would be very difficult to manage. All of these characteristics could potentially be eliminated from this or any other future model for the study of media representations of disabled persons, as they are unlikely to be found in any media portrayal, disabled or otherwise.

### **Characteristics Seen Only Once:**

While it is important to note which characteristics of the model were never seen throughout the course of the content analysis, it is also essential to see which characteristics or questions were only found once in the content analysis. There were three characteristics in the model that were only seen in one of the characters studied: (1) the character is only there to make people sad, (2) the representation is wholly pitiful, and (3) the character is only overcoming obstacles and is not allowed to have setbacks. Like the characteristics never seen, these three traits have certain reasons why they may not have been found often in the content analysis, namely that they reflect representations that are “wholly” or “only” something. It is very unlikely for even minor characters to be completely one-dimensional, so to have a “wholly pitiful” or “only sad” character is difficult to manage.

Further support for this belief that creating a one-dimensional character is very difficult in today’s media is found in the fact that these three characteristics were found among only two characters: Jean Sylvester on *Glee*, who appears on roughly one-fourth of the episodes; and Dr. Virginia Dixon on *Grey’s Anatomy*, who appeared only on three episodes altogether. Jean Sylvester is the least advanced character studied in my content analysis, with half of her characteristics falling in the “pity” category. She exhibits two of the three above characteristics:

(1) the character is only there to make people sad and (2) the representation is wholly pitiful. Dr. Virginia Dixon represents the other characteristic mentioned above in that she is only overcoming obstacles and not allowed to have setbacks. Both characters were limited in their scope to change because of the infrequency they were featured on the shows, and this limited air time is what makes them able to fall under such polarizing characteristics.

### **Characteristics Seen Most Often:**

Of the 31 different characteristics used in the revised model, three were found in at least ten of the 14 characters studied for the content analysis: (1) character does daily tasks like other characters, (2) disability is the defining trait or characteristic, and (3) the character is a member of a team. While there were several other characteristics seen in at least a third of the characters studied, these three represented the most frequently found traits. Eleven of the 14 total characters studied for the content analysis participated in daily tasks like the other, non-disabled characters on their shows. The three representations in which this characteristic was not found were our three of the four least advanced portrayals: Becky Jackson, Jean Sylvester, and Max Braverman. There were ten of the 14 characters that had their disability as their defining trait or characteristic; the four representations that did not include this characteristic were all deemed “3-D character” portrayals. Finally, ten of the 14 characters studied were members of some kind of work, social, or sports team. As these characteristics were found in a large number of the characters studied, it can be hypothesized that these are the most efficacious in terms of studying disabled representations in media today.

### **What pattern, if any, exists?**

After my content analysis was complete, I studied the results to ascertain whether any pattern existed in the results. For the most part, the characteristics of the “pity” and “limitation”

categories seem to fit together quite well in terms of character representations on shows. If a character exhibits traits from the “pity” stage of the model, he or she is more likely to also exhibit traits from the “limitation” stage of the model. That same character is not so likely to include traits found in the “3-D character” stage of the revised model. Furthermore, those representations that encompass primarily traits from the “3-D character” category of the model will have very few, if any, characteristics from the “pity” or “limitation” stages. The “pity” and “limitation” characteristics tend to clump well together, while the “3-D character” traits tend to stay primarily in their own category.

### **Are Representations *Too* Advanced?**

A final question to consider in this discussion of media representations of disabled persons is whether representations are *too* advanced. In this content analysis, 14 total disabled characters were studied; and, of those 14, eight were deemed a “3-D character,” or advanced representation. While this percentage of “3-D character” representations suggests a positive trend for media portrayals of the disabled, one cannot help but wonder if media (or television shows in this case) are overcompensating in an effort to put out almost unrealistic representations of the disabled. Of the eight characters that were deemed “3-D,” six of them were either doctors or crime scene investigators, positions that require both a fairly advanced education and incredible intelligence on a specific subject. It is also interesting that while it is incredibly difficult to find any data regarding the percentage of doctors or medical practitioners who are disabled, over a third of the total characters studied are involved in medicine in some way.

In reality, the most common types of jobs for the disabled are those in the service or hospitality industry, and those “work at home jobs.”<sup>16</sup> Even Workability, an advocacy

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<sup>16</sup> *Work at Home Jobs for the Disabled – Don’t Let Your Illness Stop You*. Workability: Jobs for Disabled. <http://www.workability1.net/work-at-home-jobs-for-the-disabled-dont-let-your-illness-stop-you/>

organization dedicated to helping the disabled find work, supports work from home jobs as it believes that it can be “incredibly hard to find or to work a traditional type of job” because of a disability.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the number of disabled in the federal work force (those CSI and FBI jobs for instance) is at less than one percent, a sign that the types of characters with disabilities on television today may be an unrealistic representation of our society.<sup>18</sup> With this information, the question becomes is the number and breakdown of these advanced characters realistic or indicative of real world scenarios? Or, have media gone too far because they at other times did not go far enough?

The question of *too* advanced disabled media portrayals represents an interesting paradox. On the one hand, it is good to have advanced portrayals of disabled characters on television because it gets the audience thinking about greater possibilities for the disabled in the future. But on the other hand, seeing such accomplished disabled portrayals on television makes it easy for the mass citizenry to pretend that they live in a much more equal society than they really are. This discussion of portrayals of persons with disabilities in the media as unrealistic also lends itself to the broader dialogue of how realistic media representations are in general. Media scholar Richard Butsch found that there tends to be an over-representation of the middle-class in programming and that these shows reinforce the middle-class ideal of “an exaggerated display of affluence and upward mobility.”<sup>19</sup> Butsch’s research suggests that television programming is simply more likely to include a representation of a well-adjusted person in a professional position, then someone who is socially inept and of the working class. Can the same be said of disabled representations? Would we just rather see a disabled character succeed

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<sup>17</sup> Same as above.

<sup>18</sup> Keating, Michael. *Number of disabled in federal work force continues to decline*. GOVPRO: From the editors of Government Product News and Government Procurement. [http://govpro.com/issue\\_20070101/gov\\_imp\\_78175/](http://govpro.com/issue_20070101/gov_imp_78175/)

<sup>19</sup> Butsch, Richard. *Social Class and Television*. The Museum of Broadcast Communications. <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=socialclass>

both personally and professionally so we don't feel bad for them? Do we accept advanced portrayals so we don't have to think about a more realistic situation? And, at the end of the day, do we really care if the representations we deem accurate are really realistic at all?

### **Limitations of my Study**

My study was truly one of the first content analyses focused exclusively on representations of the disabled. For this reason, my findings are important to the overall dialogue regarding media representations and their effect on different groups in society, particularly those minority groups. My study is also important because representations on television are important. Many media scholars have suggested that television programming, even more so than Hollywood films, matter in terms of understanding societal perceptions on different issues and groups of people. It would be very difficult to prove whether media content causes societal change or vice versa, but it is easy to say that these two matter to one another. Because of this relationship between media content and broader societal beliefs, television representations of disabled persons matter in terms of both mirroring and influencing public attitudes regarding persons with disabilities. But, while my research is certainly important, my study is far from faultless and includes certain limits that may hinder the ability of my findings to be generalized to all network television representations of disabled persons.

For any researcher, there seems to never be enough time to conduct as full a study as one would like. The lack of time I faced meant that the study is not as extensive as I would like it to be, including only those disabled characters featured from 2008 to the present, and not a wider breadth of portrayals. The 14 characters involved in the content analysis represent 11 different network television shows. And of these 11 total shows included in this study, eight have been on the air for longer than the three seasons studied during my content analysis.

Future research could expand my own study to include representations from a broader time period than just since 2008 on. The decision to study portrayals from 2008 on was to coincide with the most recent revision of the Americans with Disabilities Act, with the reasoning that real-world progress for the rights of disabled persons may be reflected in changes in the types of media representations of disabled persons. It would be interesting to have information on representations of the disabled prior to 2008 (and even further back) so that a comparison can be made between current representations and those of past decades. A broader time period to study would also enable the researcher to note if an evolution of character takes place throughout the course of the show, and would allow a richer assessment of Clark's hypothesis that media representations change over time. Instead of an analysis just focusing on current portrayals, a study involving a greater time period could see if and how representations in the media are changed.

Related to the limitation of a short time constraint, the other main limitation to my study is the lack of inter-coder reliability in my categorizations of the different representations. Because time was limited, I was the only person who participated in the content analysis, watching the shows and checking off which characteristics were found. Like all people, I come equipped with my own biases, and those affected how I viewed the characters on the shows which directly related to which characteristics I deemed present in the representations. Therefore, no other person served as a cross-coder to see if the characteristics I found were also seen by another coder. This lack of another coder means that while I sought to remain as unbiased as possible in my content analysis, my data is not as reliable as if there had been a second viewer. Future studies may combat this same limitation by employing at least two (or even more) coders for the content analysis so that inter-coder reliability is at its highest. The



characteristics used in these findings would then only be those found by either all or a majority of the coding panelists, ensuring that the results were as able to be generalized to all disabled representations as possible.

One final hope I have for subsequent research on this subject is the inclusion of all disabled characters across a variety of media, beyond those on network television shows. My study focused on those disabled characters found on network television channels – NBC, ABC, CBS, FOX, and the CW (CBS/Warner Brothers). However, there are disabled characters found on television shows not aired on a network channel, and these could help to add to the broader discussion of representations of disabled persons. With the inclusion of non-network television characters, future studies could more wholly understand representations of all disabled persons, and comparisons could be made between network and non-network television portrayals. Future studies could also look into film or movie representations of disabled characters, and then compare or contrast the types of portrayals found on television with the types of portrayals found in Hollywood. A study with a wider pool of characters could possibly yield results that are more generalized for the greater research on media representations.

## **Conclusion**

As a mass communications student, I have spent the last four years learning about how media and society relate to one another. I have seen how well-known cultural stereotypes become shortcuts in the production of media content. I have understood that what someone hears in talks with their family and friends, and what someone sees in their news and entertainment media affect how he or she will perceive various issues, situations, and groups of people. I have known from early on that I wanted to engage in substantive research about these topics to understand media representations better, especially in terms of minority groups. And,

when I began my research and found little to no information regarding representations of the disabled, I realized that my thesis should focus on creating some type of method to analyze disabled portrayals.

The first part of my thesis question asked if Cedric C. Clark's 1969 model of the four stages of media representations for minority groups (which had been used to study other minority groups) was applicable for studying media representations of the disabled. After research proved that stereotypes of the disabled were inherently different than those of other minority groups, I revised the model to more aptly fit disabled media portrayals. The next parts of my thesis question asked what the results of my content analysis revealed regarding network television representations of the disabled, and whether the revised model was successful in studying these representations.

As discussed in both the Results and Discussion sections, the revised model revealed that media representations of the disabled may be further advanced than one might have expected, given the lack of previous research done to study these portrayals. Of the 14 total characters studied in the content analysis, eight were deemed to be "3-D character," or the most advanced, representations. This result shows that media representations of disabled persons are quite advanced in relation to the revised version of Clark's model of portrayals of minority groups. This statistic also implies that disabled characters on network television shows are mostly viewed as dynamic and well-rounded people, who engage in many of the same activities as their non-disabled counterparts.

To figure out how effective the revised model was in studying media representations of disabled persons, I looked at both how often each of the characteristics was found throughout the content analysis and how the characteristics clumped together. I saw that six of the 31

characteristics were never seen or seen only once over the course of the content analysis, which may imply that all six of these traits may be unsuitable for the study of disabled media portrayals. With 25 of the 31 characteristics seen in at least two characters – and many found in at least a third of the characters studied – it can be reasoned that the revised model was fairly successful in studying media representations of the disabled.

The revised model could also be deemed successful because of how the characteristics clumped together. The “pity” and “limitations” characteristics tended to group together, while the “3-D character” characteristics tended to stand on their own. For instance, if a character had mostly “pity” traits, he or she would most likely also include some “limitations” traits. But that same character would be unlikely to embody any “3-D character” characteristics, because of the differences between the characteristics. Because the characteristics clumped together like they did, it is implied that the characteristics I developed were successfully divided amongst the three different categories of the revised model.

The final part of the thesis question asked about the stage of media representations of the disabled both for now and for the future. The results of this content analysis clearly show that most of the disabled characters on network television shows have garnered respect and become more than just the token disabled person. And as media representations of minority groups tend to become more advanced as time elapses, it is hopeful, but also reasonable, to assume that disabled characters will continue to have a more inclusive and respectable place in network television programming. It is certainly my hope that portrayals of disabled characters will become even more advanced in subsequent media content, and that this thesis, as well as the model created within it, will serve as a means for analyzing those future representations.

## Appendix A – Characters Included in Content Analysis

1. **Dr. Gabriel Fife:**
  - a. *Private Practice* – ABC
  - b. Wheelchair/spinal cord injury
  - c. Portrayed by Michael Patrick Thornton
  - d. Actually disabled
2. **Becky Jackson:**
  - a. *Glee* – FOX
  - b. Down Syndrome
  - c. Portrayed by Lauren Potter
  - d. Actually disabled
3. **Jean Sylvester:**
  - a. *Glee* – FOX
  - b. Down Syndrome
  - c. Portrayed by Robin Trocki
  - d. Actually disabled
4. **Al Robbins:**
  - a. *CSI* – CBS
  - b. Amputee
  - c. Portrayed by Robert David Hall
  - d. Actually disabled
5. **Dr. Virginia Dixon:**
  - a. *Grey's Anatomy* - ABC
  - b. Asperger's Syndrome
  - c. Portrayed by Mary McDonnell
  - d. Not disabled
6. **Parker and Preston Scavo:**
  - a. *Desperate Housewives* - ABC
  - b. ADHD – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
  - c. Portrayed by Joshua Logan Moore and Max Carver
  - d. Not disabled
7. **Brick Heck:**
  - a. *The Middle* – ABC
  - b. Asperger's Syndrome
  - c. Portrayed by Atticus Shaffer
  - d. Not disabled

8. **Dr. Spencer Reid:**
- a. *Criminal Minds* – CBS
  - b. Asperger's Syndrome/Autism Spectrum
  - c. Portrayed by Matthew Gray Gubler
  - d. Not disabled
9. **Gil Grissom:**
- a. *CSI* – CBS
  - b. Hearing loss
  - c. Portrayed by William Petersen
  - d. Not disabled
10. **Dr. Temperance Brennan:**
- a. *Bones* – FOX
  - b. Asperger's Syndrome
  - c. Portrayed by Emily Deschanel
  - d. Not disabled
11. **Dr. Gregory House:**
- a. *House, M.D.* – FOX
  - b. Autism spectrum/physical disability (walks with a cane)
  - c. Portrayed by Hugh Laurie
  - d. Not disabled
12. **Lieutenant Joe Swanson:**
- a. *Family Guy* - FOX
  - b. Wheelchair
  - c. Voiced by Patrick Warburton
  - d. Animated show – no indication of actual disability
13. **Artie Abrams:**
- a. *Glee* - FOX
  - b. Wheelchair
  - c. Portrayed by Kevin McHale
  - d. Not disabled
14. **Max Braverman:**
- a. *Parenthood* - NBC
  - b. Asperger's Syndrome
  - c. Portrayed by Max Burkholder
  - d. Not disabled

## **Appendix B: Information about Disabilities Seen in Content Analysis**

While I have been around people with disabilities for most of my life and have at least a basic understanding of many types of disabilities, I understand that not everyone has had the same experience in working with the disabled as I have. This appendix will therefore serve to give some basic background information about the different disabilities mentioned in this thesis and content analysis. More information may also help readers to better understand why certain disabilities elicited specific characteristics from the revised model.

### **Physical Disabilities**

Some of the characters studied in this content analysis were afflicted with physical disabilities that left them to either walk with a cane or use a wheelchair. Terri Goldstein of the California State University, Northridge describe the causes and symptoms of physical disabilities in their research on disabilities in education and the work place. Goldstein writes that many physical disabilities are either “congenital or a result of injury, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy . . . or more.” She continues that many physically disabled people rely on different devices to aid their mobility such as “wheelchair, crutches, canes, and artificial limbs.”<sup>20</sup> This information highlights the fact that physical disabilities are caused by a variety of congenital diseases or illnesses, and also injuries that are incurred after birth.

### **Down syndrome**

A number of the characters in the content analysis had Down syndrome, an intellectual disability that also involves some physical abnormalities. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, well-known activist for disabled rights as well as the founder of Special Olympics, created a National Institute of Health called the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development

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<sup>20</sup> Goldstein, Terri. *Physical Disabilities – Basic Information*. California State University, Northridge Students with Disabilities Office. <http://www.csun.edu/~sp20558/dis/acknowledgement.html>.

(NICHD) that focused on raising awareness on intellectual disabilities such as Down syndrome. On the NICHD website, Down syndrome is defined as a “set of mental and physical symptoms that result from having an extra copy of Chromosome 21.”<sup>21</sup> The intellectual symptoms of this disability include slower mental development, limitations “on intellectual abilities and adaptive behaviors,” and slower motor and language development (NICHD). The NICHD outlines several of the common physical signs of Down syndrome as well: deep crease in the palm of the hand, poor muscle tone and loose ligaments, flat face with an upward slant to the eye, short neck, and small hands and feet. The severity of Down syndrome varies depending on the individual, with some needing permanent caregivers and others being able to hold permanent jobs and maintain both platonic and romantic relationships.

### **Autism spectrum**

Autism is one of several illness or conditions known as developmental disabilities, as it mostly affects a person’s ability to perform day-to-day functions. The Environmental Illness Resource states that people with Autism can have a variety of characteristics:

1. “Marked impairments in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body posture, and gestures to regulate social interaction;
2. Failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level;
3. Delay in, or total lack of, the development of spoken language;
4. Lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level;
5. Apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals;

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<sup>21</sup> *What is Down Syndrome?* National Institute of Child Health & Human Development.  
[http://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/down\\_syndrome.cfm](http://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/down_syndrome.cfm).

6. Stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (e.g. hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements);
7. Marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others (if adequate in speech); and,
8. Persistent preoccupation with parts or objects.”<sup>22</sup>

Like those afflicted with Down syndrome, Autistic children and adults vary in the severity of their disability, which is why a spectrum exists to gauge how severe or moderate a person's Autism is. While some Autistic persons cannot maintain eyesight or hold conversations with anybody, others are able to blend in fairly well with non-disabled persons. With all of these disabilities, it is most important to realize that every case should be judged on an individual basis, and that even those with the same diagnosis have different capabilities.

### **Asperger syndrome**

While technically a condition found on the Autism spectrum, Asperger syndrome is prevalent enough, both in society and in this content analysis, to merit its own discussion. The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke describe Asperger syndrome a developmental disability with the following symptoms:

1. “Repetitive routines or rituals’
2. Peculiarities in speech and language, such as speaking in an overly formal manner or in a monotone, or taking figures of speech literally;
3. Socially and emotionally inappropriate behavior and the inability to interact successfully with peers;

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<sup>22</sup> *Autism Spectrum Disorders*. The Environmental Illness Resource. <http://www.ei-resource.org/illness-information/environmental-illnesses/autism-spectrum-disorders/>.



4. Problems with non-verbal communication, including the restricted use of gestures, limited or inappropriate facial expressions, or a peculiar, stiff gaze; and,
5. Clumsy and uncoordinated motor movements.”<sup>23</sup>

As Asperger syndrome is a condition found on the Autism spectrum, the same common symptoms are found in each. Asperger's tends to most affect a person's social interaction skills, and presents itself as impairment to the formation and maintaining of friendships and other relationships. Like all the other intellectual or developmental disabilities mentioned, persons with Asperger syndrome should be evaluated on an individual basis, as each have different severities of impairment.

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<sup>23</sup> *What is Asperger syndrome?* National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.  
[http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/asperger/detail\\_asperger.htm](http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/asperger/detail_asperger.htm).

## Appendix C: Characteristic Distribution for All Categories and All Characters

### 1. Dr. Gabriel Fife:

- a. **Pity:** 16.67% (1 of 6 total characteristics seen)
- b. **Limitations:** 16.67% (1 of 6 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D character:** 66.67% (4 of 6 total characteristics seen)

### 2. Becky Jackson:

- a. **Pity:** 20% (1 of 5 total characteristics seen)
- b. **Limitations:** 60% (3 of 5 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D character:** 20% (1 of 5 total characteristics seen)

### 3. Jean Sylvester:

- a. **Pity:** 50% (4 of 8 total characteristics seen)
- b. **Limitations:** 50% (4 of 8 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D character:** 0%

### 4. Al Robbins:

- a. **Pity:** 0%
- b. **Limitations:** 12.5% (1 of 8 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D character:** 87.5% (7 of 8 total characteristics seen)

### 5. Dr. Virginia Dixon:

- a. **Pity:** 23% (3 of 13 total characteristics seen)
- b. **Limitations:** 46.2% (6 of 13 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D character:** 30.8% (4 of 13 total characteristics seen)

### 6. Parker and Preston Scavo:

- a. **Pity:** 0%
- b. **Limitations:** 20% (2 of 10 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D Character:** 80% (8 of 10 total characteristics seen)

### 7. Brick Heck:

- a. **Pity:** 20% (2 of 10 total characteristics seen)
- b. **Limitations:** 60% (6 of 10 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D character:** 20% (2 of 10 total characteristics seen)

### 8. Dr. Spencer Reid:

- a. **Pity:** 7.7% (1 of 13 total characteristics seen)
- b. **Limitations:** 7.7% (1 of 13 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D character:** 84.6% (11 of 13 total characteristics seen)

### 9. Gil Grissom:

- a. **Pity:** 0%
- b. **Limitations:** 7.7% (1 of 13 total characteristics seen)

- c. **3-D character:** 92.3% (12 of 13 total characteristics seen)

**10. Dr. Temperance Brennan:**

- a. **Pity:** 11.1% (1 of 9 total characteristics seen)
- b. **Limitations:** 11.1% (1 of 9 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D character:** 77.8% (7 of 9 total characteristics seen)

**11. Dr. Gregory House:**

- a. **Pity:** 20% (3 of 15 total characteristics seen)
- b. **Limitations:** 6.67% (1 of 15 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D character:** 73.3% (11 of 15 total characteristics seen)

**12. Lieutenant Joe Swanson:**

- a. **Pity:** 13.3% (2 of 15 total characteristics seen)
- b. **Limitations:** 33.3% (5 of 15 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D character:** 53.3% (8 of 15 total characteristics seen)

**13. Artie Abrams:**

- a. **Pity:** 0%
- b. **Limitation:** 9% (1 of 11 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D character:** 91% (10 of 11 total characteristics seen)

**14. Max Braverman:**

- a. **Pity:** 37.5% (3 of 8 total characteristics seen)
- b. **Limitations:** 50% (4 of 8 total characteristics seen)
- c. **3-D character:** 12.5% (1 of 8 total characteristics seen)

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