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# Representing Autistic Masculinity: Hegemonic Gender Performances in Contemporary Autism Films

James Samuel Kizer  
*Minnesota State University Mankato*

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Representing Autistic Masculinity  
Hegemonic Gender Performances in Contemporary Autism Films

By  
James Samuel Kizer

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
In  
Gender and Women's Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

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Representing Autistic Masculinity: Hegemonic Gender Performances in Contemporary  
Autism Films

James Samuel Kizer

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's  
committee:

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Dr. Laura Harrison

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Dr. Shannon Miller

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Dr. Sachi Sekimoto

## Abstract

While longstanding notions of autism have conceptualized it as medicalized disability, recent scholarship has advanced theories of autism as cultural production; in other words, autism may be better understood as a synthesis of medical science, media portrayals, and societal attitudes rather than the product of any of these arenas individually. Academic inquiry into the intersection of autism and gender, though, remains largely underdeveloped. Work has been done theorizing how autistic people understand their gender but little exists regarding how cultural apparatuses actually produce it. My study, then, addresses this gap through examining media representations of autism, specifically autistic masculinity in contemporary popular film. I utilize R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication to interrogate filmic representations of young adult autistic male characters in *Mozart and the Whale* (2005), *Adam* (2009), and *My Name is Khan* (2010), specifically noting the ways that their masculinity is represented. I expand on Conn and Bhugra's (2012) examination of tropes used in "autism films" to discuss how these representations of autistic men also align with hegemonic gender norms. From this, I examine how the aforementioned films work to produce autism as a gendered identity. Additionally, I unearth how representations of autism are bound to dominant understandings of gender, and that media portrayals of autistic men are problematic beyond stereotyping disability. Implications on the future of studying depictions of autism in media will be discussed, as well as how such scholarship may be useful for actual autistic men to more effectively navigate the culture.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Autism has long been conceptualized as a medical disability that impairs social interaction, motor skills, and thought processing, according to Alexander Durig in *How to Understand Autism- The Easy Way*. A wealth of academic scholarship and medical research has been done to improve support for autistic individuals and create a more comprehensive understanding of the condition and how to address it<sup>1</sup>. However, in comparison to medical literature, little work has been done that frames autism as a cultural phenomenon that is socially constructed and rooted in systems of power, privilege, and oppression. Of the studies that do address these concerns, research on media representations of autism is noticeably underdeveloped, yet media have a profound impact on cultural understandings of different identities and social issues. In order to understand autism holistically, this gap in scholarship should be addressed. My study accomplishes this by interrogating representations of autistic masculinity in three contemporary films.

Feminist movements and resulting scholarly contributions make clear that media representation matters, especially when considering that media are virtually inescapable. Communication scholar Deanna Sellnow affirms this by noting that explosive growth in new media technologies has increased media consumption at a staggeringly high rate (3). She goes on to say that there is a correlation between portrayals of cultural difference and how these differences are actually valued (Sellnow 4). Autism is a recognized cultural difference. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 1 in 68 children are diagnosed with it and that it is reported in all racial, ethnic, and

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<sup>1</sup> See the section “Autism as Medical” in Chapter Two: Review of Literature

socioeconomic groups in the United States (“Data & Statistics”). The American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-5) defines autism as a spectrum disorder, meaning it has a wide array of possible presentations and diagnostic criteria, and notes that it is largely believed to be a lifelong condition even though it is commonly thought to be limited to children. Interestingly, despite autism’s prevalence, media representations of it are both uncommon and homogenous. Current representations of autism across all mediums have largely shown autism just as disability, ignoring that this intersects with gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. This, of course, is problematic since autism is gendered, raced, and classed in real life. My study will explore possibilities not only regarding how autism is gendered, but how media may be central to this process.

Specifically, by interrogating representations of autistic masculinity in the films *Mozart and the Whale*, *Adam*, and *My Name is Khan*, I will examine not only how these films represent autism but also how autistic people might interpret these portrayals. Briefly, here is a description of the main characters in the three films I will analyze: *Mozart and the Whale*’s Donald is a white male nearing thirty years old and is a taxi driver. The film’s plot centers on his budding romantic relationship with an autistic woman. In *Adam*, Adam is white and in his late twenties. Like Donald in *Mozart*, he desires a romantic relationship with a woman he meets, but she is not autistic. Rizwan Khan, from *My Name is Khan*, is Indian and living in the U.S. during the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. His autism coupled with his race complicates interactions with federal authorities, so the film centers on the struggle to clear his name. Interrogating the intersection of autism and gender as it is portrayed in



these films opens possibilities to theorize relationships between autism, gender, and media so that actual autistic people might find enhanced possibilities to understand their own identities. This is particularly important and timely since much work has been done for the benefit of practitioners, family members, and allies of autistic people, but little exists for actual autistics to utilize.

Compounding this problem further, media scholarship analyzing autism is largely confined to representations of autistic children, but not adults, and little of the work that exists is intersectional in its approach. To respond to these concerns, I use feminist media research as the sole method of inquiry for two interrelated research questions: do media representations of autistic masculinity appeal to hegemonic, counterhegemonic, or negotiated understandings of gender? And, regarding the characters I analyze, how does autism inform their masculinity? In other words, I explore the relationship between autism and masculinity as it is portrayed in film and interrogate whether or not this relationship resists hegemonic ideas about gender. I hypothesize that my examination will find that autistic masculinity is constructed in accordance with hegemonic norms *but*, because of autism, can actually be understood as a counterhegemonic gender identity.

My study draws upon existing scholarship in gender studies, disability studies, and communication studies and is designed to produce meaningful results for all three disciplines. From these fields, I located three bodies of knowledge that led to my work: autism as medical versus autism as cultural, the intersection of autism and gender, and the politics of representing autism in media. Although the number of works in these areas (especially the last two) is noticeably small, I reviewed what does exist to make the significance of my study apparent. Of particular importance is Rory Conn and Dinesh

Bhugra's 2012 study "The Portrayal of Autism in Hollywood Films." Conn, a psychiatrist at Kent and Canterbury Hospital in London, and Bhugra, Professor of Mental Health and Diversity at King's College in London, mapped out all feature-length films that featured an autistic character. Their study briefly surveyed all of these films—23 in total—and how mental health practitioners and the general public might find them useful in understanding and responding to autism. Their broad approach provided an excellent starting point for my own study to expand on their work by bringing gender into conversations surrounding autism and representation.

To conduct my own research that delves deeper into autism films, and specifically the intersection of autism and masculinity within them, I consulted two key scholars. Gender theorist R.W. Connell's work on hegemonic masculinity foregrounds my own media analysis, since autistic masculinity should be analyzed in context of normative notions of gender in order to determine if and how it resists these norms. Communication scholar Stuart Hall's model of encoding and decoding media messages also proves critical to my study, as both media production and interpretation are crucial to unearth how media produce autistic masculinity. To that end, when collecting data from the three films I was intentional in considering both the filmmakers' agendas and how autistic viewers might receive them in an effort to ensure my study considers media as cultural conversations between producers, viewers, and ideologies (Sellnow 8).

There is still much work to be done, though, that my study does not address. Chiefly, autistic femininity—an identity for which there is a severe lack of study and even interest—is not discussed in my thesis. Additionally, I examine only one medium (film), but autism is also portrayed in literature, television, social media, and news media,

all of which also need more critical inquiry. Despite its narrow focus, my study offers further insight into the intersection of autism and gender and the role that media play in constructing this. Perhaps most important to note is that my study only covers media representations of autism and does not account for the actual lived experience of autistic people. While my intent is for my study to be useful within the autistic community, I cannot safely assume that this will be realized.

### **A Note on Language**

In my project, I use identity-first language (i.e. autistic person) instead of person-first language (i.e. person with autism). There has been a debate over which of these semantic devices is most appropriate to identify autism, but autistic blogger and advocate Lydia Brown notes that identity-first language signals that autism is an inherent part of one's identity. Additionally, she contends that using person-first language makes it easier to minimize or isolate autism from the individual, rendering disability less impactful. For this reason, unless quoting directly, I use identity-first language to reinforce my position that autism is an inseparable part of intersectional identity. It is also important to note that I use autistic (lower-case "a") as opposed to Autistic (upper case). This is primarily my stylistic choice. While no academic inquiry exists on the distinction, blogger mommy~dearest suggests that autism is a descriptor but Autism is a culture ("Why I Use the Capital A), so there are implications to my decision to not capitalize autism. Andrew Solomon, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Columbia University Medical Center, notes that a similar rhetorical distinction can also be found in Deaf culture. Deaf (upper case) refers to a culture whereas deaf (lower case) is a pathological term (Solomon 50); it is reasonable to assume that using the lower case autism could be understood similarly.

However, since my study is examining media representations and does not delve into the lives of actual autistics, lower-case autism seems more appropriate.

### **Precis of Chapters**

The remaining chapters of this thesis proceed as follows: in Chapter Two, I review literature from multiple academic disciplines and bodies of knowledge that foreground my contribution to scholarship on autism. Chapter Three details my methodology, including a working definition of autistic masculinity and my personal investment in the project. Chapter Four is a presentation of my findings from each of the films I interrogate, and I interpret and discuss implications of my results in Chapter Five.

## **Chapter Two: Review of Literature**

In order to critically analyze how the intersection of autism and masculinity is represented in popular film, it is important to first review scholarship on the nature of autism. Drawing from the academic disciplines of disability studies, popular culture studies, and gender studies I focus on literature regarding whether autism is medical or cultural, the ways that the intersection of autism and gender is understood, and the politics and processes of representing autism in popular media. The works reviewed contextualize historical developments and theoretical frameworks that foreground this study. Importantly, while the literature reviewed here indicates that more nuanced understandings of autism exist, much of the scholarship often centers the disability as the focal point of analysis rather than as an integral component of intersectional identity. My study intervenes by considering autism and gender as intrinsically tied both to each other and to media representations of them. To do this, I must first credit a wide array of scholars and their contributions, as my study emerges from this rich and multifaceted history of autism.

### **Autism as Medical versus Cultural**

The nature of autism itself should foreground any further discussions of it, so in this section three major schools of thought—that autism is a medical diagnosis, a cultural construction, or a synthesis between the two—are central. Regardless of how different scholars have come to understand the disability, it is important to consider its origins. Investigative journalist Steve Silberman provided a detailed comprehensive account on how autism was discovered, coined, and developed to its current form. He notes that, while psychiatrist and clinical physician Leo Kanner is primarily credited as the father of

autism, the concept of autism itself precedes him by decades and scores of other autistic voices were downplayed or made invisible (Silberman 5, 15). Kanner conceptualized autism based on two broad criteria: desire to be alone and isolated from others and a fear of change and surprise (Silberman 182-3). He later defined more specific attributes, many of which remain hallmark signs to diagnose autism, including certain physical behaviors (spinning in place, walking on toes), presence of self-stimulating activity like the flapping of hands, and intense fascination in extremely narrow subjects (Silberman 183). Through in-depth research into these earliest developments, Silberman fills in the gaps that were missing in the history of autism and more fully extrapolates on the historical developments that are currently understood as canonical (15).

Silberman's journalistic account of autism both critiques and expands on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). First published in 1953 and now in its fifth edition (DSM-5, published 2013), the DSM records all neurological, psychiatric, and other mental health conditions recognized by medical professionals, in addition to providing detailed methods for diagnosing and treating such disorders. The DSM has recognized autism as a spectrum disorder since its initial publication, meaning that there are myriad possible ways that autism presents itself and each has its own official diagnosis based on social and emotional connections, ability to communicate nonverbally, and ability to maintain meaningful relationships. This changed with the DSM-5, though, and Autism Spectrum Disorder is now the diagnosis for any presence of the disorder based on severity of behavior and not specific attributes, a shift that seems to homogenize autism despite still recognizing it as a spectrum. Silberman notes that the DSM is not a medical guide that is merely revised in accordance with new studies; rather,

it is a look into the culture, a framework to understand disability in context of sociopolitical factors (Silberman 383). However, since such factors are not monolithic (and, as literature in this review suggests, neither is autism), constructing a diagnosis for autism that yields consistent replicable results is a challenging task (Silberman 385-6). It seems appropriate, then, to construct a workable understanding of autism that credits medical professionals for their contributions without centering them as the baseline from which inquiry into autism must start.

### *Autism as Medical*

The medicalization of the body is nothing new, and people with disabilities (including autism) are subjected to such processes. Sociologist Antonio Maturo, writing for the US National Library of Medicine, defines medicalization as “a process by which some aspects of human life come to be considered medical problems, whereas before they were not considered pathological” (123). In other words, doctors have the ability to determine what is deemed acceptable or deviant in a society based on creating medical conditions from otherwise innocuous phenomena. Sociologist Peter Conrad, who researches medicalization, expands on this definition: medicalization is “a problem defined in medical terms, described using medical language, understood through the adoption of a medical framework, or ‘treated’ with a medical intervention (Conrad 3). By this, he means that “an entity that is regarded as an illness or disease is not ipso facto a medical problem; rather, it needs to become defined as one” (Conrad 4).

Catherine Reissman, professor emerita of social work at Boston University, offers a specific case study regarding how medicalization functions. She argues that “the transformation of such human experiences as childbirth, reproduction, premenstrual

problems, weight, and psychological distress into medical events has been the outcome of a reciprocal process involving both physicians and women” (Reissman 16). Medical specialists, she argues, create demand for additional health services as a result of this process, so medicine is constantly being redefined. Taking this further, psychologist Joan Chrisler argues that cultural attitudes intersect with processes of medicalization to create “culture-bound syndromes,” defined as “constellations of symptoms that have been categorized as dysfunctions or diseases in some societies but not in others” (332). Using premenstrual cycle as a case study, Chrisler posits that culture-bound syndromes work in tandem with other cultural systems (medicine, education, law) to define lived experiences as medical problems which effectively function as oppressive conditions (336). None of these contributions exist to say that disabilities are not real and valid, but rather that the medical nature of disability may be culturally constructed and thus unnecessarily pathologized.

Leo Kanner’s definition of autism and the current interpretation of it have remained engrained in medical fields, specifically those that diagnose and develop treatment strategies for people who have autism. Sociologist Alexander Durig recounted how psychology and neuroscience are utilized to create the medical definition of autism but that these fields are dominated by people who are considered “normal,” so autism is framed as abnormal (17). He labeled this process the “medicalization of autism” to emphasize how the medical community understands autistic people as having deficits compared to non-autistic (neurotypical or NT) people; as such, he discussed how autistic people are treated with less respect as a result (Durig 18). However, he failed to take into



account that medicalization also describes how social power hierarchies are created and maintained as a result of medical diagnoses, a gap that other scholars have addressed.

Using a more nuanced approach to medicalization, Alistair Wardrobe, a medical student at the University of Sheffield, argued that this process is responsible for injustices against disabled individuals, particularly that their own health can lead to social and political discrimination (342). Jeanne Hayes and Elizabeth Hannold, rehabilitation professionals with the Veteran's Affairs hospitals, echoed this in their study, paying careful attention to how medical professionals themselves are responsible for processes of medicalization in how they talk about and treat disabled people (355). Communication professor Majia Nadesan, drawing from all of these models, concluded that autism is neither a monolithic nor homogenous concept, as medical understandings of autism are complicated and contested (79). All of this goes to show that despite having some official diagnostic criteria, autism has no solid workable definition in the medical realm alone; even among practitioners in similar fields the definitions differ greatly. Philosophy professor Alison Reiheld used the medicalization of autism to discuss how this process is integral to and informed by systems of hegemonic power (74). To understand this power more completely as it relates to autism, the scope of inquiry should be widened to interrogate how the disability is understood culturally.

#### *Autism as a Cultural Construction*

Expanding on preexisting tensions surrounding medical definitions of autism, the cultural approach to understanding this disability is arguably more complex. In any case, autism exists in a cultural and historical context that includes the medical approach but should not be limited to it. Dan Zahavi, a Danish philosophy professor, discussed how

autistic peoples' conceptualizations of self and self-understandings are three-dimensional, meaning that lived experiences, relationships with others, and narratives about autistic people are all factors in how autistic people make sense of their identities (549). He does not, however, offer great detail on how each of these components function, but autism researcher and writer Adam Feinstein shed light on this and argued that explicit connections exist between diagnostic criteria and cultural attitudes, hinting at the possibility that cultural notions of autism are interrelated to medical understandings. Professors Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, both from the University of Illinois' Department of Disability and Human Development, developed this notion further and discussed that state apparatuses such as medical institutions serve as these connections. Those with disabilities like autism are constructed as problem bodies so their lived experiences, interpersonal relationships, and cultural narratives are also framed as problems (Snyder and Mitchell). In other words, cultural notions of autism and autistic people follow directly from how the disability is positioned medically. Meng-Chuan Lai, Michael Lombardo, and Simon Baron-Cohen, all of the Autism Research Centre in the United Kingdom and leading autism experts, used this framework to hypothesize that improving the lived experiences for autistic people may require addressing the cultural mechanisms that construct it and not just advocating for changes in medical practice (903). The authors did not address what this might look like, but made clear that both medical and cultural approaches to autism are part of both the treatment of autism as problem bodies and as potential avenues to empower autistic (907).

*Autism a Synthesis of Medical and Cultural Models*

While medical and cultural models of autism are popularly viewed as distinct, literature in both arenas established the case that they may be interrelated. This does not call the legitimacy of either framework into question, as both medical and cultural approaches are backed by scholarship. It does suggest, however, that autism may best be understood as a synthesis between the two models, so I approach my study with this possibility in mind. Psychologist Steven Kapp et al. make clear that the medicalization of autism cannot be isolated from constructing autistic identity, but uses the growing neurodiversity movement to theorize a new relationship between autistic people, autism, medicine, and cultural discourse, proposing that the movement for autistic acceptance is negotiated between treating autism as deficit (see Durig, page 4) and as difference (62). Put succinctly, autism is simultaneously celebrated and disrespected in the culture. Autistic advocacy groups like the Autism Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) openly and publicly proclaim that people on the autism spectrum are rich in diversity and thus should “enjoy the same accesses, rights, and opportunities” as any other citizen, according to the organization’s website. While there is progress in this regard, ASAN notes that public policy often neglects to fully consider the needs of autistic people and their families, and that legislation surrounding autism is often tied to other policy initiatives. This downplays the necessity to bring autism to the forefront in political debates about disability (ASAN). Stuart Murray, Professor of Contemporary Literatures and Film at the University of Leeds (United Kingdom), attended to how the many social and political histories of disability created the environment in which these tensions can emerge, making a point to argue that autism should be examined holistically as a result, as

opposed to attempting to create a nuanced understanding using a single framework (*Autism*).

All three of the aforementioned models highlight the ways that autism is constructed in the culture, and indeed this is important to establish. As evidenced, these models do not yield a single working definition of autism, but collectively they are useful in that they attest to the nuance and constant innovation that construct autism as a human condition. However, all of these models focus on autism as disability exclusively; they do not take into account other intersecting identities. My study relies on the model of autism as a synthesis of medical and cultural frameworks, since this offers the most well-rounded starting point to discuss how disability and gender might intersect. Since my own study examines the intersection of autism and masculinity and how this is represented in media, it is imperative to review scholarship that examines gender and disability to position my study in the larger scholarly conversations regarding autism.

### **Autism and Gender**

Discussions on the intersection of autism and gender are relatively recent, with most emerging after the year 2000. Although some literature in this section does also interrogate this notion, the identity politics that emerge when considering identity intersectionality are of chief concern. English professor Jordyn Jack's study offers an excellent starting point: she examined dozens of autistic people's interactions in online spaces, specifically the ways they perform gender through language and how this grants autistic people a way to understand their own gender identity (3). Cultural geography scholars Joyce Davidson and Sophie Tamas found, though, that autistic-identified individuals might not perform gender at all; rather, it is a "ghost concept" that has no

bearing on autistic lives because even the most progressive understandings of gender are incompatible with the vast array of autistic peoples' experiences. Autistic individuals, then, are more prone to reject gender entirely as they cannot enact it on terms understandable to the larger culture (Davidson and Tamas 3). Political science professor Kristin Bumiller explored how autistic use social movements as a way to create space to redefine gender on their own terms (968). Jack and Bumiller both explore how autistic people perform their gender beyond cultural binaries and narratives about what it means to be masculine and feminine; however, their studies also address a wide array of gender difference. Since my project focuses specifically on autistic masculinity, I also must review literature that focuses specifically on masculinity, disability, and the intersection of the two.

Even though autistic gender performance may be innovative, hegemonic notions of masculinity still impact disabled bodies. It is crucial, then, to discuss how hegemonic masculinity has been defined and theorized and how this concept intersects with autism. Sociologist R.W. Connell coined the term hegemonic masculinity and defined it as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). Connell and criminologist James Messerschmidt traced the critical components of hegemonic masculinity, particularly that it is “the plurality of masculinities and the hierarchy of masculinities” that are products of “cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and marginalization” (846). In other words, there are dominant patterns of masculinity that both draw from and impact cultures and these are designed to

establish and maintain patriarchal control (Connell and Messerschmidt 852).

Messerschmidt later expands on his collaboration with Connell, arguing that hegemonic masculinity is no longer a homogenous term. The theory, he posits, has been applied to a wide array of gendered phenomena in the culture, allowing its application to become increasingly complicated, contested, and reimagined. As part of this reimagining, political science scholar Claire Duncanson argues that hegemonic masculinity may prove useful as a concept for social change. The pessimism that is often associated with the theory might be overshadowing possibilities to reframe hegemonic masculinity as a tool for social change.

While there is research suggesting that the theory can grant possibilities for change, hegemonic masculinity is still firmly grounded in theorizing gendered power dynamics in the culture. Education scholars Thomas Johansson and Andreas Ottemo posit that hegemonic masculinity creates a certain social order concerning men's relationships with women and other men, resulting in "a struggle for gender equality and a more just society" (204). Humor scholar Barbara Plester notes that even forms of cultural rhetoric like humor can reinforce hegemonic masculinity through the normalization of misogynistic and homophobic comedy, especially in organizational settings (such as fraternities, clubs, sports leagues) in which these behaviors are encouraged. Such patterns are also racialized, which communication studies scholar Thomas Nakayama discusses. "In sum," he argues, "the contemporary discussion on race and masculinity continues to run the risk of defining 'race' as blackness with all of its attendant problems" (Nakayama 113). So, most cultural conversations around masculinity and race usually treat race as a binary, which not only dismisses a wide array of racial difference but also reifies cultural

constructions of race as serving whiteness and white hegemony (Nakayama 111). Political scientist Linda Trimble and her colleagues add further depth to this, arguing that hegemonic masculinity intersects with racism to produce and regulate popular opinion of public officials, allowing hegemonic *white* masculinity to become the benchmark for determining which bodies do and do not have agency. Little scholarship exists that interrogates how autism and hegemonic masculinity intersect specifically, but this lack of research indicates that autistic masculinity is rarely racialized and, as such, may have assumed whiteness.

Despite all of this, disability studies expert Russell Shuttleworth argued that disabled men do not, and often cannot, adhere to hegemonic masculinity; the presence of disability is culturally understood to undermine men's agency, so those with disabilities do not possess the necessary agency to be considered members of dominant social groups (166). Thus, disabled men are deemed incapable of occupying hegemonically privileged spaces; their bodies prevent this. These same men, however, may feel the need to compensate for this, but it is more likely that they will act counterhegemonically and resist societal norms so that their gender is not confined; they allow space for masculinity to be fluid (Shuttleworth 167). They find ways to identify with masculinity by defining it on their own terms. Interestingly, Shuttleworth found that a key reason for this is so that these men have access to sexual intimacy, implicitly stating that the intersection of masculinity and disability can simultaneously be fluid and appeal to hegemonic norms (169). While autism is not inherently a physical disability, it stands to reason that his study can be applied to studies on autism and masculinity. If autistic people are working to reimagine or even reject notions of gender since they do not fit into any current models

of it (see Jack, page 7; Davidson & Tamas, page 8), then an argument can be made that they are acting counterhegemonically to liberate their identity from cultural constraints surrounding gender. Autistic individuals and communities are redefining gender on their own terms so that they may attain their visions of agency and fulfillment. While not dealing with sexual intimacy, my project hypothesizes that autistic masculinity can be both hegemonic and fluid, so Shuttleworth's work is a useful starting point to theorize how gender can be innovated in context of disability.

### **Disability, Representation, and Autism**

While the literature on autism and masculinity explores different ways that gender is written onto the autistic body, the impact of media on these processes is understudied and may be significant. As such, scholarship on the relationship between autism and media representation is important to frame my own study. This section reviews literature on the politics of representing autism, including a specific discussion on representing autism in film. This scholarship focuses largely on analyzing how autism is portrayed as a disability, but does not seem too concerned with intersectional autistic identities. My study addresses this lack. Prior to reviewing works on representing autism specifically, I will first discuss work that has been done surrounding media representations of disability in general.

#### *Disability in Popular Media*

Education professors Robert Bogdan and Douglas Biklen provide an overview of how mass media images present "prejudicial and stereotypic images of the handicapped" (7). They noted that mental illness is often treated as bizarre and dangerous. Physical disabilities are commonly associated with ugliness, which in turn is usually portrayed in



conjunction with violence and criminal activity (Bogdan and Biklen 7). In addition to popular media, news media also represents disability negatively: if a criminal is disabled in any way, their disability is usually framed as the cause for the crime. When someone has a mental disability, they are positioned as childlike (Bogdan and Biklen 8). Special education scholars Ronda Black and Lori Pretes provide a more concrete model regarding how media represent disability, arguing that most depictions can be reduced down to seven tropes: pitiable and pathetic; supercrip (one who overcomes obstacles and becomes an inspiration to others); sinister, evil, and criminal; better off dead; maladjusted—own worst enemy; burden to family and/or society; and unable to live a successful life (77-9). While these tropes may seem oversimplified, they form the foundation for a majority of popular culture representations of disability.

Delving deeper into these cultural trends of confining representations of disability into narrow tropes, sociologist Fiona Whittington-Walsh posits, “the mainstream film industry continues to manufacture disability representation from an analysis of deviance and stigma and has profited greatly from it” (705). By framing disability in this way, media portrayals establish and reinforce the notion that people with disabilities are to be feared, an ideology that correlates with the idea that the disabled should be pathologized (Whittington-Walsh 704). Expanding this conversation to women specifically, sociologist Rosalyn Darling argues that “most [women with disabilities] are portrayed as victims and as dependent on others, and the majority express bitterness, despair, and self-loathing. Yet they do not rebel against society’s view of them as useless, pitiable, and undesirable” (57). In addition to representing people with disabilities as incompetent adults who need constant guidance from non-disabled individuals, her analysis suggests that they are

comfortable with (or unable to challenge) hegemonic notions of ability. This reifies the idea that people with disabilities belong to an oppressed group in the culture.

Historian and disability ethicist Paul Longmore discusses how contemporary representations of disability create a cultural paradox. On the one hand, he argues, portrayals of disability do fall into specific tropes that often “show that disability deprives its victims of an essential part of their humanity, and ultimately requires that they be put to death” (Longmore 138). Other representations offer a different perspective that allows for people with disabilities to live productive lives and have meaningful relationships. Interestingly, though, “the stories put the responsibility for any problems squarely and almost exclusively on the disabled individual,” suggesting that they have chosen whatever social isolations and oppressions they may experience (Longmore 138). This ignores how cultural systems are involved in constructing disability, a recurring theme that continues to exist in popular media (Longmore 139). This paradox becomes particularly crucial when examining intellectual and developmental disabilities, a category into which autism fits. Occupational therapy specialists Rebecca Renwick, Ann Schormans, and Deborah Shore analyze what types of employment are granted to developmentally disabled characters in film. They argue that due to media impacts in informing public perception, the narrow range of jobs afforded to these characters construct the idea that people with disabilities are inherently limited when it comes to being successful in the workplace. This again downplays the reality that employers often discriminate against disabled individuals, placing the responsibility for limited employment on disabled people and not on cultural systems.

Health scientist Willie V. Bryan, synthesizing these ideas, posits that media produce and continuously reproduce the notion that disabled and nondisabled people cannot make and sustain relationships. According to most representations of disability, he argues, the disabled are deemed unworthy to be in the presence of the nondisabled (Bryan 13). Simultaneously, those without disabilities are uncomfortable around those who are disabled; combined, these two ideals comprise a double bind in which disabled people do not have space in the culture to be their authentic selves (Bryan 13). This ideology foregrounds media depictions of autistic characters.

### *Politics of Representing Autism*

Critical analysis of autism in popular media is a relatively recent scholarly development that draws on scholarship from a multitude of disciplines in the liberal arts, humanities, and social sciences. Stuart Murray traced these contributions to develop a framework that attempts to theorize how media narrate autism as a disability, specifically addressing how autism often hinges on certain tropes (*Representing Autism*). He spends the entirety of his book discussing how these tropes, including but not limited to the savant and the quirky, show up across different media and how they are used to pathologize autism. However, he also notes that some media representations of autism also appeal to the supercrip trope (see Black and Pretes, page 19) in that they present autism as an obstacle to be overcome and the characters effectively do so. General semantics scholar Alexandria Prochnow's study is similar but she paid careful attention to how these tropes are unrealistic and/or unlikely (136). By this, she means that many representations of autism are portrayed so positively that they ignore some of the harsh realities that are often associated with the disability (Prochnow 147). While both autistic

characters and actual people can and do overcome major obstacles, this does not excuse the reality that disability is still hegemonically oppressed.

English language scholar Malcolm Matthews further expanded on the trope of the savant, arguing that representations of autistic men and their relationships with neurotypical (non-autistic) men lead to a new understanding of the savant trope; however, this does not inherently break free from stereotypical portrayals of autism. Looking at shows like *The Big Bang Theory*, he found that representations of autistic (or presumed autistic) men are not really innovative, but rather fresh takes on old stereotypes. The idea that autistic men lack a sense of sexuality and sexual desire, possess computer-like mannerisms and speech patterns, are similar in physical appearance, and rarely deviate from their routine approaches to communication are all reified in contemporary television.

Even popular film, a medium that provides plenty of time to develop characters holistically, often hinges on these same characteristics. Disability scholar Anthony D. Baker contended that these tropes reinforce the problematic ways that autism is understood in the culture precisely because they appeal to stereotyped and monolithic expectations of what autism is (231). His argument that autism has become spectacularized and formulaic is rooted in the idea that the entire autistic identity may also be spectacularized and formulaic, so there is no room for genuine neurodiversity. By this, he means that autism is culturally constructed, especially through media production, to be homogenous; such constructions do not account for rich diversity that is found within autistic communities. Conn and Bhugra (see Introduction, page 4) constructed the idea of “autism films” to specifically describe films that fit such narrow molds. They

argued that films featuring autistic characters are situated specifically in this genre of autism films, since the presence of autistic characters alters how viewers might perceive the film as a whole (55). In other words, even if the plot of the film does not center on autism, viewers focus on disability as the key theme that undergirds the entire text. Their study hinged specifically on the implications for medical practitioners and autism advocates, in particular how they can use the tired tropes to open a conversation about accepting neurological difference and integrating autism into the culture as opposed to isolating it (Conn and Bhugra 57). Their method may be applicable to study how gender is discursively composed in autistic films, but the notion of autistic films itself establishes that there is a specific area of inquiry into which more intersectional scholarship is necessary. My study addresses this need, in addition to adding to the underdeveloped body of scholarship that exists concerning the intersection of autism and media representation.

## **Conclusion**

The works reviewed here offer just a glimpse of the intriguing history and multifaceted development of autism and how it is narrated and understood in multiple contexts which often overlap and inform each other. Even within and among three distinct bodies of knowledge, it should be apparent that autism should not be positioned so concretely; instead, it should be examined as constant negotiation and discourse between the various approaches. Understanding autism is an ongoing process that lends itself to critical inquiry and regular interrogation of sociocultural systems and state apparatuses, since it is through these endeavors that these bodies of scholarship emerge and interact to create meaning.

The scholarly contributions to the medical and cultural natures of autism, the intersection of autism and gender, and the politics of representing autism inform my own study on how autistic masculinity is represented in contemporary film. I am indebted to these works and those who composed them, and my own project should add to the already rich and increasingly complicated scholarship on how to understand autism and autistic identities.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

In this project, I examine the gender performances of the following three autistic male characters: Donald Morton in *Mozart and the Whale* (2005), Adam Raki in *Adam* (2009), and Rizvan Khan in *My Name is Khan* (2010). Specifically, I analyze how their presentations of masculinity are or are not informed by their autism; in other words, I explore how these characters negotiate the intersection of gender and ability and explore possibilities for how autism and masculinity are related. I hypothesize that, despite having some performances of masculinity that align with hegemonic norms, the characters actually resist normative notions of gender because they are autistic. This research contributes to emerging discussions about the intersections of autism and gender identity and suggests that improved representations of autism are essential to more fully understand how autistic people make sense of their gender.

#### **Text Selection Process**

I selected *Mozart and the Whale*, *Adam*, and *My Name is Khan* based on several selection criteria. As discussed in the introduction, Conn and Bhugra identified twenty-three “autistic films” in their study (56), so I used their list as the starting point to select the films for my study. In an effort to keep my analysis relevant and timely, I decided to focus only on films that were released in 2005 or later (my study was conducted in 2015, so this keeps the films no older than a decade). I also selected films in which autistic characters are considered protagonists or main characters (and not merely supporting or secondary), and these characters’ autism was not only explicitly mentioned, but also relevant to the plot. I also eliminated films featuring autistic children; as discussed in the literature review, an array of studies has been done on media representations of autistic

childhood and on parents of autistic children, so my study focuses only on autistic adults since research is not as common in this area. Since I am interested in the intersection of autism and masculinity, I also eliminated films featuring female-identified autistic characters. I recognize this does not account for the nuances of gender identity and fluidity, but focusing on autistic men exclusively allows me to interrogate autistic masculinity more concretely, which yields more specific results upon which future research can develop. After applying all of these criteria to Conn and Bhugra's list, only the three aforementioned films remained, so my study will focus on them exclusively. Box office statistics are not important to this study. The mainstream autistic advocacy organization Autism Speaks list all three of these films on their website as important media materials for families and supporters of autistic people to view, so an argument can be made that those who would be most impacted by these films may be the ones viewing them.

### **Methodology**

This project uses feminist media analysis to interrogate how autistic masculinity is represented in the three films and how these representations are situated in certain cultural contexts. McIntosh and Cuklanz explain that feminist media research centers media texts as the center of analysis to unearth and evaluate ideologies, expressions of power, and relationships between dominant and minority groups with the specific goal of “instigating positive social change” (267). While feminist media analysis can take on a variety of forms, a thematic analysis seems to be most fitting for my study. Such an analysis seeks out patterns that are present within and across media texts and allows for the researcher to identify, explore, and evaluate these patterns (McIntosh and Cuklanz



284). This is a qualitative method as it goes beyond simply enumerating occurrences of a specific phenomenon and instead looks at how and why these phenomena take place, so deploying this method provides space for my study to more completely evaluate and potentially problematize how autistic masculinity is represented.

My study focuses on ability and gender as the themes of inquiry. All three of the characters I selected are autistic and are understood as masculine, so I am concerned with how autistic masculinity—the intersection of these themes—shows up in the films *and* if it appears similarly across the three films I chose. A concrete definition of autistic masculinity has not yet been developed, so for purposes of this study it is defined as stereotypical masculine traits (including assertiveness, desire for success and status, toughness, and aggression) that are either explicitly or implicitly infantilized, treated as unpredictable, or used to signal one's inability to navigate their surroundings. In other words, when autistic men demonstrate masculine characteristics, their behavior is interpreted as childlike, quirky, or just strange even if these gender performances align with hegemonic norms. Masculinity for autistic men is not understood as a symbol of status, but rather a sign of ineptness. Regardless of how masculine they present themselves, autistic men are treated as though they are incapable or incompetent to live their lives without having a strong non-autistic person to cling on to. The presence of autism complicates how masculinity can be analyzed. This definition makes clear that masculinity and autism are in conversation with each other, thus establishing that they cannot be analyzed in isolation but rather must be examined intersectionally. Using this denotation of autistic masculinity as the basis for coding not only narrows my focus but also ensures that data from the films are intentionally intersectional.

I first viewed each film once, leaving at least one day between each viewing so I do not blend the content in the films. After these initial viewings, I began coding, a process that is used to “collect relevant information from texts and making note of them and their locations in the text” in an effort to pay critical attention to their usefulness and gather extensive details about the theme (McIntosh and Cuklanz 286). To code appearances of autistic masculinity, I noted when it is on display interpersonally (character’s interactions with others), intrapersonally (character’s internal monologue or narration in the film), and environmentally (character’s life experiences that do not involve other people). This is my own coding method that allows me to create a detailed composite of when and how autistic masculinity is portrayed, as I am not limited to certain types of interactions or scenarios. As I watch the films I noted whenever the character expresses self-awareness of his autistic masculinity *and* when other characters in the film do so. In other words, I paid attention to specific instances when the character’s autism and masculinity are marked and highly visible, even if such visibility is not explicitly stated in dialogue, hence the necessity of considering nonverbal cues like body language and environmental context. I kept a dedicated handwritten notebook for each film so that I can code more quickly, but then inputted them into Microsoft Excel so that I could locate specific notes with greater efficiency when I discuss my findings.

For example, while watching *Mozart and the Whale*, I created an Excel worksheet for this film. I will make three columns for environmental, interpersonal, and intrapersonal interactions, next to which I will make note of every instance when Donald’s autistic masculinity is visible. While he always *has* it, that does not mean a viewer can always *see* it. To better evaluate representations of autism in film, it must first

be made visible, so the coding process will be useful in creating this visibility. There is a scene where Donald is at work in a call center and is fighting the urge to call his love interest, so he puts duct tape on all of the phones near his desk. I marked this instance as one where Donald's autistic masculinity is on display due to his environment, so my notes include a row with the timestamp and a brief description of the scene under the column "environment." In the same scene, his boss remarks on the "quirkiness" of this situation, again bringing Donald's autistic masculinity to the forefront. Caroline Narby notes that "quirkiness" is a term often used to indicate an autistic's childlike naivety, effectively infantilizing them, hence why this interaction is coded as a display of autistic masculinity (n.p.). This was marked as an interpersonal occurrence since both Donald and his boss are openly aware of his visible autistic behavior. Similarly, when Donald feels entitled to rearrange someone's apartment because it does not fit his style, I coded this as an intrapersonal display of autistic masculinity since he is talking to himself during this scene. I executed similar coding processes for each film. In the event that a scene had more than one possible coding (intrapersonal and environmental may overlap, for instance), I listed the occurrence in all relevant categories.

After finishing the coding process, I revisited my notes with a different set of codes. I am interested in whether or not the intersection of autism and masculinity is rooted in hegemonic masculinity. R.W. Connell is largely credited for coining this concept, so I drew from her framework in *Masculinities* to gauge whether or not the characters in my analysis can be understood as hegemonically masculine. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as a series of behaviors and attitudes that positioned men as dominant over women and is considered to be the cultural norm to which all men as

expected to adhere (109). There is assumed whiteness in hegemonic masculinity, so race is a site of inquiry since it does impact understandings of gender. Because of this, I interrogate both whiteness and other racial identities in my study, since two of the characters are white and one is a person of color. In doing so, I unpack how whiteness is unmarked in the films I analyze and how this, in turn, impacts plots, character interactions, and behaviors in the films. However, for purposes of this project, my use of Connell's theory specifically allows me to more concretely evaluate tensions and overlaps between autistic masculinity and hegemonic masculinity. For each instance of autistic masculinity in the films, I marked whether it can be interpreted as dominant (hegemonic), oppositional (counterhegemonic), or negotiated, using the definitions set forth in Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding." It should be noted that Hall's theory mainly applies to how viewers interpret a media text, but he does note the producers of these texts possess agendas; in other words, even though viewers can read a text in several ways, the text itself still has a "preferred meaning" (Hall 509). As such, my coding process hinges on both aspects: what appears to be the intended message regarding autistic masculinity and in what ways could this message be interpreted? I paid careful attention to instances in which the preferred reading and possible interpretations do not align and elaborate on these occurrences in my discussion. After I complete the coding process, I reorganized my notes so the sections on interpersonal, intrapersonal, and environmental are further subdivided into dominant, oppositional, and negotiated.

For instance, *Adam* has a section for dominant interpersonal, oppositional interpersonal, and negotiated interpersonal readings of autistic masculinity. By doing this, I can visualize how these media depictions adhere to or resist normative cultural notions

of ability and gender and discuss how each character embodies these themes and how they constitute a holistic identity. I conclude my coding by looking for patterns between the three films. Do representations of autistic masculinity share similarities across the texts? What does this reveal about our culture's positioning of this identity? I attempt to answer these questions when discussing the data in my thesis. Taken as a whole, this coding process lends itself to an intersectional analysis. This is important since there is little research on autistic masculinity, let alone media representations of it, so I need to pay attention to how my analytical process allows for the intricacies of this concept to become apparent.

### **Positionality**

As an autistic male-identified person, I am aware that my ability and gender not only influence my desire to conduct this study, but they also greatly inform how I analyze the scenes in the films on which I focus my inquiry. As the sole researcher, my interpretations of whether a scene can be decoded as dominant, oppositional, or negotiated stem, in part, from my own positionality. Additionally, autistic masculinity as an identity cannot be isolated from racial identities. I account for this in my analysis by discussing how race plays a role in each film, particularly as it relates to how race is unmarked when the characters are white and highly visible when they are men of color. I examine how this informs the films' narratives and how depictions of autistic masculinity are tied to the character's race. While this analysis is insightful, I admit that my project appeals to my own identity, which might hinder its generalizability.

My autism shows up in the research process, as well. I am aware that watching *Mozart and the Whale*, *Adam*, and *My Name is Khan* may be difficult as some scenes

may come across as highly personal. Seeing any autism portrayed on screen may lead to me seeing *my* autism, which is often an emotional and draining experience. Many of the scenes in the films are also extremely sensory, bridging together loud and sudden audio with rapid visuals, and so I may experience sensory overload and be unable to continue watching, which is a response I have based on my autism. Should this occur, I will have to take a break from watching and return to the film later; otherwise, I risk a meltdown, defined as an “involuntary increase in tantrum-like behaviors usually as a response to one or more stressors” (Kelble n.p.), which would compromise the research process.

More importantly, I must be aware of my positionality as an autistic graduate student. I consider myself highly educated, a privilege that few have, so I need to check that privilege. Since I am writing to improve understandings of autistic identities, I do not desire to place myself as being above them; my experience as autistic is not any better simply because I have attained a postsecondary degree. I also should take into account that, even though I am autistic and *I* see it as highly visible, for all intents and purposes I pass as neurotypical, or non-autistic. Unless I come out as autistic, I have found that people rarely notice it. Frankly, I take some pride in passing since I am able to navigate the culture without being overly scrutinized or questioned. My white and male privileges coupled with my passing privilege make it all too easy to isolate myself from the study, when in reality I cannot critically analyze autistic masculinity as a concept without implicating myself in the process. Whether I see it or not, my own autistic masculinity has been influenced by media representations of autism. I must be careful in navigating the line between researcher and researched, since I ultimately embody both spheres in this project.

## **Contributions and Limitations**

The literature review establishes that some research has been done on media representations of autism and on autistic masculinity, but research that engages the two is limited, at best. My study attempts to demonstrate that inquiry into autism must include more nuanced discussions on gender and media representations. More importantly, perhaps, is that most research on the intersection of autism and gender does not interrogate how autistics come to embody their gender identity. At least one scholar (Jordyn Jack, see literature review) works to understand different ways autistics express and perform gender, but she does not truly develop a case for how and why such gender identities emerge in the first place. My study will intervene by centering film as a key cultural factor that prescribes how autistics should understand and enact gender. In other words, I am shifting the focus from autistic bodies to the popular culture in which they are situated and gendered. This is important since understanding autism should result from analyzing the relationship between autistic bodies and their surrounding cultures, as opposed to looking at those realms individually.

However, despite this unique approach to feminist media analysis of autism, some limitations do exist and are worth noting. The autistic characters I study are media representations and may not accurately portray autistic men. My study only accounts for how autism is represented, not how autistic people experience their lived realities. Autism is a wide spectrum condition that, although having some diagnostic criteria, cannot be concretely defined. My approach to feminist media analysis is highly structured and procedural which may be perceived as a disservice to the autistic community by lacking sufficient nuance. Additionally, while I work to draw connections between the themes in

the texts and the themes in real life, actual autistic people and their supporters might find these to be inaccurate. Perhaps most importantly, my study considers only characters who are represented as higher functioning autistic men, or those who have a wide range of interpersonal communication skills. This completely ignores lower functioning autistics who have even less media about them. My study could be perceived as exacerbating the hierarchy that seems to exist between different manifestations of autism. Lastly, my focus on autistic male characters leaves innumerable other representations of autism out of the equation. Since research on media representations of autism and gender is still relatively new, my study is part of academic inquiry that is still in its infancy. Significantly more work is needed to truly develop this scholarship from a group of studies (including mine) into a recognized body of intellectual inquiry.



## Chapter Four: Analysis

All three of the films examined in this study—*Adam*, *Mozart and the Whale*, and *My Name is Khan*—have clear instances in which autistic masculinity is represented on the screen. In this chapter, I analyze these portrayals and consider what they communicate about the intersection of autism and masculinity. I did not find a large quantity of occurrences in which autistic masculinity is present; however, this section reveals significant power in the representations that exist. I first examine depictions of autistic masculinity in each film individually before concentrating on thematic patterns between them. This allows me to more completely interrogate the relationship between autistic and hegemonic masculinity. Interestingly, I found that my initial hypothesis does not hold true. While I expected to find that the films would represent autistic masculinity counterhegemonically, I instead interpreted these portrayals as reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. By this, I mean that the representations of autistic men do not defy normative notions of masculinity, even though I initially thought that they would do so by virtue of being autistic.

I anticipated to find that the intersection of autism and gender is represented counterhegemonically. By this, I mean that autism and masculinity both have dominant meanings in the culture. Autism is culturally understood as a profound disorder that makes communication difficult and exacerbates tantrum-like behaviors; it is framed as a mysterious condition that makes life difficult for people who have it and those who support them. Masculinity, too, has a common cultural understanding: “be a man” by showing dominance and superiority, being rich and powerful, and keeping emotions private. Regardless of other intersecting identities and lived experiences, men are

expected to subscribe to this model for masculinity. I believed that depictions in the films would differ from these notions. In other words, I hypothesized that autistic masculinity would not align with cultural norms regarding either disability or gender; in fact, I thought these representations would actively resist such norms. I expected representations of autistic masculinity to oppose hegemonic masculinity and not hinge on stereotypes about autism, so the characters would challenge the status quo. In the films, this same idea (of differing from cultural norms) also serves as a key element of the preferred reading, or the interpretation that filmmakers expected the viewers to have (Hall 513). As a critical viewer, though, I found that the preferred reading is insufficient. I utilized a negotiated reading to unpack, problematize, and evaluate the ways in which autistic masculinity is being represented in accordance with hegemonic notions of disability and gender. I found that representations of autistic masculinity appealed to both hegemonic masculinity and stereotypes about autism, and in doing so challenged the preferred readings of the texts in which viewers were expected to feel sympathy for the autistic male characters because of how autism was impacting them and how they understood masculinity. I recognize the importance of representing autistic masculinity, as such portrayals are valuable for autistic men and those who support them; however, there is significant room to improve the quality of these representations so that they are more meaningful and accurate.

### *Adam*

Marketed as a romantic drama film when it was released in 2009, *Adam* follows Adam Raki (Hugh Dancy) and his budding and eventually failed romance with Beth Buchwald (Rose Byrne). Film critic Roger Ebert, while appreciative of the film's upbeat

approach to a murky romance, suggests that *Adam* is “missing the chance to be more thoughtful” and thorough when it comes to representing autism in popular film (rogerebert.com). A closer analysis of Adam’s character supports Ebert’s statement, especially when examining key plot points that define the course of Adam and Beth’s relationship. Three scenes, in particular, put Adam’s masculinity on display. It is not just his autism that drives the plot, but rather how it intersects with his gender. Autistic masculinity, while fully embodied in the character, is oversimplified and hinges on stereotypical notions of both autism and masculinity. Interestingly, while there are other subplots in the film that do not involve Adam’s relationship with Beth, his autistic masculinity is only on noticeable display when Beth is involved in the scene.

Such representations are evident from Adam’s first encounter with Beth, after she moves into his apartment complex. The scene opens with Adam sitting on the stairs obsessing over the latest NASA images of Saturn. Outer space is apparently one of his fixations, which behavioral scientists Chloe Jordan and Catherine Caldwell-Harris define as intense, highly-specialized special interests on incredibly specific topics. Such fixations are commonly associated with autism spectrum disorders, so the film is playing on stereotypes within its first ten minutes. While Adam is engrossed with Saturn, Beth enters the scene carrying a seemingly heavy load of groceries. “Well, I’ll just be hauling these enormous grocery bags upstairs,” she mentions, to which Adam replies, “okay.” After moving the bags herself, Beth returns to the steps to invite Adam to join her and some friends for a dinner gathering, a question that makes him visibly uncomfortable. He ends up not attending since Beth knocked on his door eleven minutes later than he

expected; however, he was visibly distraught by this, indicating that he did truly want to spend time with Beth.

At this point in the film, Adam's diagnosis is not made explicit, but the viewer is directed to believe that there is something different about Adam. The awkward exchanges with Beth, visual representations of his routine, and suggestions that he desires a meaningful relationship with another person (but does not know how to do so) appear to be intended for the viewer to have sympathy for Adam and perhaps develop a sense of hope that he will realize these things as the film progresses. This scene also suggests that Adam may be autistic or have some other disability or mental condition. More importantly, though, is the notion that *Adam* has established a preferred reading for autistic masculinity, or the meaning that the producer intends for the audience to receive (Hall 509). In his interpersonal conversations with Beth, Adam embodies two contradictory notions of masculinity. On the one hand, he appears to put his interests above Beth's. While this does not inherently demonstrate that Adam deems himself superior to Beth and other women, the scene is nonetheless aligned with hegemonic masculinity which hinges such a superiority complex (Connell 111). Even though the socially appropriate thing to do would be for Adam to carry the groceries up the stairs and accept Beth's invitation for a date, he does not do so because of his autism. Contradicting this, though, is the idea that Adam's gender display is overshadowed by his apparent disability. His seemingly dominant masculine traits are made to appear childish. The film suggests, then, that autistic masculinity is incomplete, fragile, and easily disrupted, traits that stand opposed to hegemonic masculinity. From these opening sequences, it seems as though the preferred reading of *Adam* is for the viewer to interpret

autistic masculinity as being out of alignment with cultural norms of masculinity. In other words, Adam's autism prohibits him from behaving in an "appropriately" masculine way.

This preferred reading stands as the film progresses. Shortly after the staircase scene, Adam invites Beth into his apartment so he can show her his images from deep space, again playing on fixation as a key identity factor in autism. Beth feigns interest as Adam rants and raves, with visible excitement, about the wonders of space. As soon as Beth expresses an opinion that Adam does not believe, however, he stops talking and issues an apology for talking too much. While this seems innocuous, such an interpersonal exchange reinforces the notion that men should be experts in specialized subjects and that women should take pleasure in listening to them discuss their interests. Again, though, this scene depicts Adam's excessive talking as childlike fascination rather than gendered communication, downplaying any power dynamics and further solidifying the preferred reading of autistic masculinity as not aligning with cultural gender norms. By this, I mean that his character is pathologized and treated as childlike, as opposed to being presented as traditionally masculine. A similar interpersonal moment occurs shortly after this, when Adam takes Beth to Central Park after dark to view the raccoons. The park is closed and raccoon spotting is not commonly associated with a good first date, but both of those concerns are dismissed. Adam desires to be with Beth on a more intimate level, so what better way to connect with her than to illegally observe ring-tailed wildlife? Beth plays along, exaggerating her excitement presumably so Adam would not get his feelings hurt, but is visible uncomfortable being in the park alone with a man she recently met. This short scene continues the trajectory of intending for autistic masculinity to be perceived as childlike and innocent by juxtaposing dominant masculine

traits (such as bending the rules to fit one's own agenda) with Beth's need to protect Adam's feelings. This scene also seems to suggest that viewers should understand Adam's character as resisting problematic norms of gender, again appealing to the preferred reading even though hegemonic masculinity is blatantly reinscribed.

One of the key defining scenes from *Adam* occurs when Adam asks Beth what she thought of the night with the raccoons. He does not phrase it so concretely, though, and poses the question, "were you excited? Because I was," which clearly equated excitement with sexual arousal. This inquiry was unprompted and jarring to Beth, who promptly got up to leave Adam's apartment. Sensing that his comment might have negatively impacted her, Adam discloses his disability which Beth eventually processes as "undateable." Even though they later have one sexual encounter, it is not shown on screen and they never develop a long term relationship, presumably due to Beth's reservations about Adam's autism. This sequence of events brings sexuality into conversation with autistic masculinity, which is important to explore.

Psychologist Isabelle Henault argues that the autistic people have sexualities and do express them, but that oftentimes such behaviors deviate from what may be considered appropriate. In this scene, Adam clearly adheres to this model, but what is interesting is that he assumed Beth was sexually aroused solely on the basis that he was. While this was clearly a misunderstanding in context of the film, it still shifts the conversation from autistic sexual expression to autistic masculinity. Adam, in his mind, had no reason to assume that Beth did not want to engage him sexually, a thought process that implies women's sexual subordination to men; however, because of Adam's innocence on the basis that autism makes communicating sexuality a challenge, such power dynamics were

dismissed and remained unchecked for the remainder of the film. It is intended for the viewer to focus on this innocence and not the politics of sexuality, which renders autistic masculinity as not fulfilling hegemonic norms. In other words, Adam's sexual innocence is represented as gender expression that goes against dominant ideas about men and masculinity while not actively resisting these ideals.

Additionally, it is important to note that both Adam and Beth are white characters. Race is not part of the plotlines in this film despite the fact that both gender and ability cannot be isolated from issues of race; in my study, only *My Name is Khan* is race integral to the plot. Both hegemonic masculinity and autism have assumed whiteness in their dominant understandings, and *Adam* does not truly complicate these notions since the film does not show how autistic masculinity is racialized. Because Adam is white, his race can remain unmarked. This allows for Adam and Beth's romantic storyline to take on a certain simplicity and render race unessential to the overall plot of the film; in other words, the only real difference between *Adam* and other popular romantic films is the presence of autism. If Adam was a man of color, his autistic masculinity would be racialized and the romantic plotline of the film would become considerably more complicated. It is because the characters are white that *Adam* can have this romance narrative without addressing more nuanced concerns regarding the intersection of autism and masculinity.

While all of the above scenes in *Adam* convey oppositional messages about the intersection of autism and masculinity as it relates to gender norms, I argue that they in fact reify oppressive hegemonic masculinity. Filmmakers may have expected for viewers to receive these oppositional ideals, or the preferred reading, but I do not find that

interpretation sufficient. Instead, I followed an oppositional reading of autistic masculinity. Despite being presented as dependent, childlike, and simultaneously distant and overemotional in his relationships, Adam displays characteristics that suggest men and masculinity should rightfully command attention and unquestioned respect from women. Caroline Narby, writing for Bitch Media, takes this point further and argues that “the unspoken implication is that a developmental disability somehow precludes the possibility of sexual assault,” as if autistic men are too innocent to even know of such realities. While the presence of autism in the film was clearly intended to render autistic masculinity as actively resisting gender norms, the opposite has proven true. *Adam* can be interpreted as a dominant hegemonic text regarding autistic masculinity. Disability does not alter gendered dynamics in the film; rather, it is used as a mechanism to make them less visible, allowing problematic notions of masculinity to become normalized in the text while concurrently reinforcing tired stereotypes about autistic men.

### ***Mozart and the Whale***

Of the three films in my study, *Mozart and the Whale* is the only one in which the entire plot focuses on the romantic relationship between Donald, an autistic man, and his autistic girlfriend Isabelle. It makes sense, then, that portrayals of autistic masculinity in the film are exclusive to scenes in which Donald and Isabelle interact. Taken as a whole, the movie reifies the idea that all men should desire intimate relationships with women and that their masculinity will not be validated until this has been achieved. The presence of disability does not undermine that aspect of hegemonic masculinity; however, most of Donald’s interpersonal interactions with Isabelle are treated as painfully awkward or even cruel, usually because he fails to understand her and sees no reason to alter his



communication to make their relationship more fruitful. From this, it seems as though the preferred reading is for viewers to feel sympathy for Donald and his apparent inability to romantically engage Isabelle. With this possible interpretation, it follows that autistic masculinity is supposed to be interpreted as counterhegemonic; it is intended to actively oppose stereotypical ideas about men due to the presence of autism. A closer inspection of key scenes in the film, though, reveals that an oppositional reading may be more appropriate. Autistic masculinity in this film can be decoded as hegemonic as a result of constantly reinforcing male dominance throughout the movie.

Donald's diagnosis is made clear early in the film when it is revealed that he runs a support group for autistic people who "have it worse" than he does, positioning his own identity as superior to other autistic characters. The support group meets in a local park and begins with Donald dividing the men and women into their own small groups to practice telling stories about their lives. In the process of creating the small groups, he notices Isabelle and suggests to one of the other women in the group to let her tell a story first so that she would feel more welcome. Isabelle, not knowing what exactly to say, shares a story about when she was raped as a teenager, prompting laughter from other members in the small group, causing Isabelle to meltdown. Donald, hearing the commotion from his group, rushes over to Isabelle to comfort her as best he can, but proves unhelpful. This scene depicts Donald's leadership and socializing skills and how he uses them in attempts to communicate with Isabelle. Because he is represented as well intentioned but ineffective, the preferred reading of this scene is for viewers to feel sympathy for his character. The whole exchange between Donald, the group, and Isabelle establishes this reading of his autistic masculinity for the remainder of the film. He sees

himself as a natural leader but cannot seem to be effective at such a position, and the tensions between those two ideals is autistic masculinity by definition.

However, hegemonic masculinity is still deeply engrained in every aspect of this scene. Donald makes several assumptions about Isabelle, none of which actually held true, but he genuinely felt he was right to do so. The first is the idea that Isabelle would feel welcomed by the group if she was asked to share her story before the other women told theirs. It did not occur to Donald to ask Isabelle about this; instead, assuming she would respond positively, he instructed another female member to see his idea through and did not ask for any input. His notion for what was best for discussion must be the only appropriate method. This can certainly be attributed to autism, as a common characteristic for autistic people is enacting highly specific communication styles and not responding to others, according to music professor and disability researcher Joseph Straus (461). However, this interpersonal exchange may be more easily interpreted as a display of hegemonic masculinity, a common attribute of which is for men to insist that their contributions to dialogue take priority, says distinguished linguist Deborah Tannen in *He Said, She Said*.

Compounding this is when Donald immediately rushes to Isabelle after a member of her group laughs when she tells the story of her rape. While another woman in the group could have just as easily responded, Donald took it upon himself to ensure that Isabelle was okay. While this was likely intended to portray him as a good leader and, again, gain sympathy from the audience as he attempts to connect with people, this scene also positions the women as incapable of meaningful communication and Donald as the male savior of the situation. This reinforces two beliefs that are hallmark components of

hegemonic masculinity. The first is that women need men to solve their problems; in other words, they need to be saved. Feminist blogger and media critic Anita Sarkeesian labels this the “Damsel in Distress” trope. While her argument primarily focuses on how popular media teaches women to act, her argument about the Damsel in Distress extends to men. In this case, films like *Mozart and the Whale* perpetuate the idea that men should always be ready and willing to be a women’s savior, which carries with it the implication that men are more capable of handling situations than women, justifying their sense of superiority. Additionally, this scene from *Mozart* reinforces the idea that men should actively insert themselves into conversations that might not be for or about them, yet another linguistic device upon which hegemonic masculinity thrives (Tannen).

*Mozart and the Whale* continues with numerous scenes that contain the preferred reading of autistic masculinity, but on closer inspection are instead attempting to mask hegemonic masculinity using disability as the guise. By this, I mean that the presence of autism in the film seems to be a device to detract from the power dynamics inherent in hegemonic masculinity. Two of these additional scenes are of particular importance. Halfway through the film, Donald and Isabelle go on their first date (that is not meeting with other members of the support group). They agree to visit the local amusement park and appear to be enjoying themselves until Donald wants to play a ring-toss game. Isabelle tries to tell Donald that the sounds of the rings clinking against the glass is a sensory overload for her that she cannot handle, but in anticipation of the noise that is about to occur her voice trails off and she braces herself for the inevitable meltdown; Donald already has the rings in hand. Unsure of why Isabelle is screaming and falling to the ground, he continues playing the game. After the game ends and the noises cease,

Donald invites Isabelle to his apartment for the first time where they talk briefly before deciding that they both want to have sex. As was the case in *Adam*, actual sexual contact is not shown on screen, but intercourse is heavily implied as the scene fades before cutting abruptly to a subsequent one. According to semiotics scholar Leslie Harris, it is not uncommon for popular films to avoid depicting disabled bodies' sexualities and sexual activity (146). By denying disabled people of sexuality on screen, it contributes to the ideology that their sex and sexuality is only valid when a nondisabled party is involved (Harris 159). The relationship between Adam and Isabelle fits this model well.

The preferred reading of autistic masculinity again suggests that the viewer should have sympathy for the character. The fact that Isabelle had a meltdown at the amusement park was supposed to be interpreted as having nothing to do with Donald; because of his autism, viewers were supposed to believe that he did not understand any ramifications of his action. The fact that they had sex after was intended to be celebrated, as if to signify that Donald and Isabelle had navigated each other's seemingly incompatible communication styles to the point of being intimate with each other. While these preferred readings hold true at first glance, they lose merit when the hegemonic masculinity embedded within them is brought to the forefront. Donald ignored Isabelle at the park. Her pleas to Donald to not play the game were quiet, but clear. Her emotional well-being was secondary to his want. Whether he failed to listen to her despite autism or because of it is irrelevant; Donald dismissed Isabelle's humanity in favor of his own, again representing men's superiority over women, an ideology that foregrounds hegemonic masculinity.

Furthermore, the film does not explicitly specify why the two characters slept together. The preferred reading is for viewers to believe it was out of desire, but Donald is also in a position of power over Isabelle since he leads the support group. It is possible that she was fearful of being ejected from the group if she refused, so even if she did want to engage Donald sexually she may have still felt as though saying no was not a viable option. Another member of the support group even accused Donald of abusing his position to sleep with Isabelle. All of this goes to show that *Mozart and the Whale* can be interpreted with a dominant understanding of masculinity (which is my interpretation), as opposed to exclusively an oppositional one. Again, though, this reading renders whiteness unmarked. Similar to what I analyzed in *Adam*, Donald's autistic masculinity is presented as an identity isolated from concerns of race and class, allowing for the film to develop a simplistic romance narrative by not racializing the characters. He benefits from white privilege in context of the film; his behaviors, interactions, and emotions are never questioned due to his race, and the film contextualizes his relationship with Isabelle by his autism and gender exclusively. His whiteness and maleness allow him to occupy positions of authority within the support group, his relationships, and his job that might not be afforded to him if he was a person of color. Additionally, other characters in the film respond to Donald's relationship with Isabelle based on how he performs his autism and masculinity in relation to her; race is never discussed in this context, another aspect of white privilege. The presence of autism impacts the storyline, but does not truly complicate how issues of gender and ability are understood when concerning autistic men. By not remarking on race, *Mozart and the Whale* frames autistic masculinity as a homogenous performance of gender and ability that is distinct from other intersecting

identities, when in fact race definitely informs Donald's character. Nonetheless, autistic masculinity in this film still conveys deeply engrained hegemonic messages about gender identity and performance, again suggesting that the intersection of masculinity and autism (as portrayed in media) actually reinforces gender stereotypes instead of resisting them.

### ***My Name is Khan***

While representations of autistic masculinity in *Adam* and *Mozart and the Whale* portray autistic men as childlike and incompetent, *My Name is Khan* offers a slightly different representation. In this film, main character Rizwan Khan moves to San Francisco to live with his brother after their mother dies in India. Shortly after moving, three plot points emerge that set the tone for the rest of the movie: Khan's brother's wife diagnoses him with autism, he meets and marries his wife Mandira, and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks take place. Two noteworthy depictions of autistic masculinity emerge after these events unfold. While it is apparent that each of these scenes do fit my model of autistic masculinity, they are more incidental in the plot of the film rather than central to it. This suggests that, even though *My Name is Khan* is listed on Conn and Bhugra's list of autism films, autism is merely depicted and is not actually a theme, a departure from the other two movies in my study. I will elaborate on this phenomenon at the end of the chapter.

Rizwan and his wife have a fulfilling marriage until the events of September 11, at which point their relationship crumbles. The family name—Khan—became increasingly scrutinized due to rising Islamophobia, leading to their son's murder during a gang fight at his school. Fearful for the other members of her family and dismayed at Rizwan's insistence to keep and publicly use the Khan name, Mandira divorces him.

With blatant sarcasm, she informs him that only if the Khan name is cleared can he return to be with his family; however, Rizwan apparently does not understand sarcasm and so he took his ex-wife's challenge literally and travelled the country to meet the President to have his name cleared. Despite the name Khan not being unique to one individual, Rizwan was thinking only of himself, his family, and his name. It did not occur to him that his quest was going to be interpreted as a political statement by other characters in the film. The preferred reading in the film's opening events seems clear: viewers are expected to feel sympathy for Rizwan and his inability to process his ex-wife's sarcasm. The journey to which he commits would be unnecessary if he had a better grasp of rhetorical devices. In other words, if Rizwan understood sarcasm there would no need for him to carry out his journey because he would know that his ex-wife was not being serious.

While this detail seems miniscule in the overall scheme of the film, that one exchange informs almost the entirety of the film's plot; as such, it is a critical moment to unpack how autistic masculinity is represented here. It is true, according to communication researcher Angela Persicke and her colleagues, that autistic people often have difficulty comprehending sarcasm, irony, and most other non-literal language. They go on to note that learning to use these language devices in everyday communication benefits the interpersonal relationships that autistic individuals have. As portrayed in the film, Rizwan does not appear to possess this knowledge, so while he had had a healthy intimate relationship for some time, his marriage ultimately failed. The one instance of failing to grasp sarcasm positions Rizwan as socially inept and informs his masculinity for the remainder of the film. In other words, his literal response to his ex-wife's sarcastic

comment undergirds how the text depicts his autistic masculinity. However, sarcasm aside, Rizwan refuses to accept losing his marriage permanently. The film centers on him attempting to win his ex-wife back, suggesting that his masculinity is at stake if he cannot maintain a long-lasting relationship. As such, his autistic masculinity might be better interpreted as appealing to dominant notions about gender. Yes, his autism informs how he understands his gender identity, but at the core of this media representation is the idea of a heterosexual marriage being crucial to hegemonic masculinity, an ideology to which Rizwan clearly subscribes. Autistic masculinity as portrayed in this film can thus be decoded as negotiated, meaning that viewers (including myself) likely understand and find merit in the preferred reading *and* other interpretations of the text (Hall 515). It is still reasonable to subscribe to the preferred reading and recognize that problematic hegemonic ideas about masculinity are still embedded in this scene.

As *My Name is Khan* progresses, Rizwan finally has an opportunity to meet President Bush to clear his name. As he is waiting in line, he repeatedly chants, “my name is Khan, and I am not a terrorist,” as having this claim validated holds the possibility to reconnect with Mandira and the rest of his family. Rizwan thinks nothing of this phrase other than it is the truth: his name *is* Khan, and he is *not* a terrorist. In fact, he had previously attempted to turn in people he thought were terrorists, but the FBI refused to take his calls. The federal agents patrolling the event did not understand his claim in a similar manner, arresting him on suspicions of being involved in a terrorist cell that might attack the event. He was sent to jail and only cleared after a psychiatrist determined that he was definitely not involved in any illicit activity. Upon his release, he went to be with some of his friends in the state of Georgia and continue the quest to clear his name.



Of my entire study, this is the only sequence of events in which autistic masculinity is clearly represented in interpersonal, intrapersonal, and environmental contexts. Rizwan's interactions with federal agents and the jail psychiatrist are clearly interpersonal, but prior to his engagement with officials at the event he was speaking to no one in particular, perhaps even just affirming his identity to himself, rendering the "my name is Khan" monologue an intrapersonal occurrence. He also experienced time alone in jail, a specific type of place, so his gender was on display as a result of his environment. Rizwan's autistic masculinity is represented similarly in all three contexts: he insisted that his story was truthful, was extremely confused when nobody believed him, and expressed distraught and resentment towards those who were imposing this poor treatment on him. Hegemonic masculinity is on display through his insistence on his story and underlying expectation that people should believe him; however, his reactions to the environment and the ways his confusion is represented adhere to dominant understandings of autism. Depicting these competing ideals simultaneously aligns with my definition of autistic masculinity. Despite having physical aggression and verbal abuse hurled at him, Rizwan did not retaliate with the same; his confusion at the situation left him all but incapable of responding at all. Even the prison psychiatrist, while noticeable more amicable, initially spoke with him as though he was a problem. Connell and Tannen both note that a component of hegemonic masculinity is the idea that men believe their narratives are to be valued above those of women and other men, so Rizwan's gender performance can be read as hegemonic in that regard. However, his visible confusion and emotional reactions in these scenes establish his autistic masculinity; even though he insists on his story, overall he does not act in accordance

with gender norms. He expresses sadness, confusion, and shock towards the events happening to and around him, none of which can be interpreted as the stoicism commonly associated with hegemonic masculinity. The preferred reading through this subplot is for viewers to sympathize with Rizwan and perhaps feel anger towards those who wronged him, suggesting that autistic masculinity is to be understood in opposition to hegemonic masculinity. It seems reasonable, based on a description of these scenes, to decode them as the production intended.

*My Name is Khan* ends on a positive note: Rizwan meets President-elect Obama, who declares, “your name is Khan, and you are not a terrorist.” His name was finally cleared, and as an added bonus he reconnects and eventually falls back in love with his ex-wife, and they presumably remarry. Everything he set out to do was fulfilled as he envisioned it. Rizwan took initiative and followed through, key components of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 834). However, the journey he took to complete his tasks was rooted in stereotypes that resist hegemonic masculinity, including expressing emotion and taking language literally, so the film represents autistic masculinity as a negotiation between the two ideals. This is the only film in my study that consistently treats autistic masculinity as a fundamentally unique gender identity.

Even though my analysis of *My Name is Khan* focuses on the intersection of gender and ability, race is visible in this film and clearly influences how autistic masculinity is depicted; this is a critical departure from *Adam* and *Mozart and the Whale*, both of which rendered race invisible. Rizwan Khan and his family are Indian or Indian-American living in post-9/11 United States, so his autistic masculinity becomes obviously racialized. Communications lecturer Clelia Clini even posits that it is the intersection of

gender and race, not ability, that drives *My Name is Khan* and positions the film as a popular culture artifact designed to explore how counterterrorist ideals impact racial minorities. The fact that Rizwan is autistic is not central to this. Expanding this further, international relations scholar Carol Gentry argues that media portrayals of Muslims and Muslim societies create and reflect larger cultural attitudes that frame Western cultures as saviors and non-Westerners as savages; *My Name is Khan* fits this formula. Interestingly, neither of these studies focus on Rizwan Khan's autism, but the intersection of autism and race as depicted in media is worth exploring.

What little scholarship that exists on autism and race is largely relegated to medical and educational reports; however, there are some studies that also bring media into the equation that should be discussed. Diseases scholar Susan Petit wrote a critical essay exploring how literature portrays the intersection of ableism and racism, arguing that the pathologization of and discrimination against autistic people can serve as a lens through which to examine how people of color experience similar cultural oppressions, even if people of color are not present in the media text. In other words, the cultural stigmas faced by autistic people and racial minorities, and those who occupy both spaces, can be understood through analyzing media (Petit 41). This is useful when analyzing *My Name is Khan*, as it suggests that Rizwan's autistic masculinity assumes greater meaning when considered with how racism impacts his character. Developmental disorders scholar Tina Dyches and her colleagues offer practical implications regarding the intersection of autism and race. They argue that autistic individuals experience further complications in their lives if they are also a racial minority including communication, social skills, behavioral repertoires, and culture (211). In other words, the already

difficult lives of autistic people are exacerbated if they also are impacted by racism. This level of complexity did not seem to be represented in the film; autistic masculinity and race were kept separate. Nonetheless, Rizwan Khan's character would attain greater depth and enhanced meaning if the filmmakers were more intentional about intersectionality and multiple oppressions.

My analysis demonstrates that the intersection of autism and gender informs the film to a noticeable degree on its own right. Future work is necessary to bring race into conversation with autism as it is represented in media, especially considering that most scholarship on autism and race does not integrate media studies in the first place. This is particularly important to discuss in order to completely flesh out the political messages (combatting Islamophobia and criticizing US ethnocentricity) written into *My Name is Khan*. Interestingly, despite the fact that this film has a romantic storyline, it is overshadowed by the political messages interwoven throughout the text. The romantic narratives depicted in *Adam* and *Mozart and the Whale* are not so obviously represented in this film, suggesting that whiteness allows for such simplicity by appealing to normative understandings of both masculinity and autism. In other words, when autistic masculinity is racialized it becomes politicized, as well. Whereas Adam and Donald are treated simply as representations of autistic masculinity, Rizwan Khan's character serves as a lens through which viewers can see race and racism and therefore is not afforded the simplicity of a romantic storyline.

## **Discussion**

The three films in my study—*Adam*, *Mozart and the Whale*, and *My Name is Khan*—all have instances in which autistic masculinity is represented on screen. With the

exception of *My Name is Khan*, the preferred readings of the films are for viewers to interpret depictions of autistic masculinity as sending counterhegemonic ideas about gender by having the characters actively resist dominant understandings of masculinity; however, my analysis revealed that these messages can be more accurately interpreted with an oppositional viewing that works to destabilize the taken-for-granted messages about autistic men (Hall 517). Hegemonic ideas of masculinity are thoroughly engrained in *Adam* and *Mozart and the Whale*, most of which hinge on the ideology that men occupy dominant positions in the and that their conduct should be structured accordingly. *My Name is Khan* provides a shift; even though some instances of autistic masculinity reify hegemonic ideologies, they do not detract from the intended meaning. It is the only film in which the preferred reading and my interpretation of it seem aligned.

Collectively, my findings do not align with my initial hypothesis. Based on previous research (see Chapter Two), I expected to find that representations of autistic masculinity had a dominant preferred meaning; in other words, I hypothesized that the intersection of autism and gender would align more clearly with stereotypical ideas about masculinity, but that autistic masculinity would be interpreted as resisting those norms (through behaviors, interactions, and responses to the environment that are not aligned with hegemonic masculinity) because the characters were autistic. I found the opposite: the filmmakers' preferred meanings were to have autistic masculinity interpreted as counterhegemonic, resisting cultural gender norms. However, I primarily decoded these texts as reinforcing hegemonic ideas of masculinity despite the presence of autism, suggesting that media representations of autistic masculinity as an intersectional identity do little to challenge longstanding systems of power and privilege. This departure from

my hypothesis also suggests that media representations of autistic masculinity (and autism in general) still rely on stereotypes and do not account for the wide array of unique lived experiences that autistic people have. Popular culture artifacts, then, do not reflect autism in an inherently positive light; rather, they continue to treat autistic people as a cultural Other and contribute to continued cultural stigma about disability.

Another common finding from my analysis is that a majority of the portrayals of autistic masculinity occur in interpersonal interactions between characters, specifically romantic relationships. This is interesting since, in real life, interpersonal interactions are often the most difficult for autistic people to navigate since it requires them to respond to communication that might not be native to them, according to developmental psychologist Uta Frith. Having the intersection of autism and masculinity depicted in interpersonal interactions suggests that the filmmakers understand such forms of communication as essential for autistic people to express and understand themselves as gendered beings. Even though *My Name is Khan* also represented autistic masculinity in intrapersonal and environmental contexts, it was interpersonal exchanges that provided the deepest analysis. Perhaps this is because meaningful interpersonal relationships are considered a cultural norm, so in order for representations of autism to gain traction they must appeal to it, especially if autism a central plot device. Regardless of why the film producers wrote the texts in this way, there is a noticeable gap between the amount of representations of autistic masculinity that occurred interpersonally and those that were present in intrapersonal and environmental contexts.

*Adam*, *Mozart and the Whale*, and *My Name is Khan* portray autistic masculinity in similar manners, relying on stereotypical notions of both masculinity and autism to

establish the characters in the films. Stark differences exist between my initial hypothesis and actual findings, as well as between the preferred reading and my negotiated reading as a critical viewer. These distinctions reveal that tensions remain between popular culture and autistic people, as their voices are not being inscribed into media in an accurate manner. While my analysis only focused on gender and ability as themes of inquiry, autism certainly intersects with race, class, and other identities, as well as with larger ideological issues in the culture (as seen in *My Name is Khan*). My study reveals that the relationship between popular culture, media portrayals of autistic masculinity, and actual autistic people is highly contested and reinforces hegemonic ideas about both autism and masculinity.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

This study interrogated how representations of autistic men in contemporary film understand and perform masculinity in an attempt to more comprehensively theorize the intersection of autism and gender. Using Conn and Bhugra's list of "autism films" as a starting point, I identified three films from the past decade (*Adam*, *Mozart and the Whale*, and *My Name is Khan*) that have an autistic male protagonist and analyzed these characters using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. These theoretical frameworks allowed me to examine the preferred reading of each film and whether or not it aligned with my interpretation. In doing so, I unearthed how representations of autism are bound to dominant understandings of gender, and revealed that media portrayals of autistic men are problematic beyond stereotyping disability. I found that stereotypes about autism are allowed to remain intact and other facets of identity are downplayed to reinforce tired messages about disability. My analysis revealed that the intersection of autism and masculinity is clearly depicted in the texts, meaning that representations of autism are shaped by beliefs about masculinity, and vice-versa. Bringing this to the forefront provides an interpretation that challenges the preferred reading in each film. In fact, it exposes that hegemonic masculinity and associated problematic ideals are written into these films, and therefore the texts should be consumed more critically.

The three films seem to use autism to distract from (and perhaps even hide the fact) the ways that hegemonic masculinity is still deeply engrained in the texts; in other words, the preferred reading in all three films centers on the characters' autism, but does not account for their gender. In the preferred reading, then, representations of autism are



the films' primary focus and viewers are not expected to interpret messages about any other aspect of identity, despite the fact that such messages are present. I questioned this as a critical viewer. My study responded to this apparent disconnect (between the preferred reading and my own analysis) and I noted how the films' interpretations become complicated when examining gender and ability intersectionally. In this chapter, I briefly return to my findings and consider how they fit in with the scholarship that foregrounded my study (see Chapter Two). I then discuss why my study matters to actual autistic men and not just practitioners, disability advocates, and allies. I conclude the chapter with directions for future research, as there is much work to be done at the intersection of autism, masculinity, and media representation.

My analytical process was twofold. I first identified the preferred reading of the films, or the messages that filmmakers expected or intended for audiences to take away. This was complicated by the fact that no evidence exists regarding the filmmakers' actual intents. To define the preferred reading, then, I drew on the films' plots, contexts, and supporting characters. This did not provide specific details regarding the preferred reading, but it made clear that each film had patterns and common themes on which a preferred reading hinges; according to Hall, analyzing textual and contextual evidence like this is one way to unpack dominant cultural messages in media, which in turn relate to the preferred reading (513-14). For all three films, the preferred reading was one of sympathy towards the autistic characters because of how autism complicated their lives and made social interaction challenging, but issues of gender were overshadowed or ignored.

After discussing the preferred reading, I analyzed the messages about autistic masculinity (defined in Chapter Three) and offered my own interpretations of the film. I assumed a negotiated reading: there is some merit to the preferred reading, but intersecting gender with autism provided me with a fundamentally different understanding of the texts. Gender and disability cannot be separated in real life, so analyses of media representations about autistic men should be conducted with an intersectional lens. My analysis deconstructed characters' behaviors to reveal how their autisms were deeply intertwined with hegemonic masculinity and made clear that representations of autism in film are informed by, and possibly rooted in, ideas about gender. While my study did not necessarily reveal that portrayals of autistic masculinity were innovative or empowering, it did make clear that there is more to autistic men than their disability; in fact, I interpreted some scenes as having masculinity positioned more prominently than autism, a stark opposition to the preferred reading.

Interestingly, at the onset of the project I hypothesized that media representations of autistic masculinity would challenge the gender binary and resist hegemonic gender norms. I anticipated that the characters Adam Raki, Donald Morton, and Rizwan Khan would perform masculinity differently because they were autistic. This aligns with the films' preferred readings—sympathy for the characters—by portraying their gender as going against the cultural norm because of their autism, and thus augmenting the characters' positions as the Other. However, this hypothesis proved largely false. In *Adam* and *Mozart and the Whale*, portrayals of autistic men firmly aligned with hegemonic masculinity. Adam and Donald exhibited a sense of superiority over women, desire for control in romantic relationships, and appeared completely absorbed in their

own self interests. The preferred reading of these two films was for the viewer to feel sympathy for the characters because of their autism; however, I complicated this reading in my analysis on the basis that hegemonic masculinity was blatant and should not go ignored when viewing these texts. My analysis demonstrated that problematic masculine ideals were prevalent throughout the films, which has gone largely unnoticed or unmentioned in previous scholarship on autism. Reading the film solely through the lens of disability (i.e. the preferred reading) masks the ways that hegemonic masculinity is portrayed in them, and viewers' lack of discussion on this issue (as well as the lack of scholarship on it) indicates that audiences are adhering to such a reading. That is not to say that viewers cannot or should not feel sympathy for the characters, but audiences should be more critical of how these portrayals are aligned with hegemonic masculinity. Failure to do so allows for such depictions of masculinity to remain above critique in autism films, which contributes to the normalization of hegemonic gender ideologies and behaviors. The presence of autism may be helpful in understanding how and why hegemonic masculinity is displayed, but it should not be used to excuse problematic conduct.

*My Name is Khan* took on a similar preferred reading with which I mostly agreed. Viewers were expected to feel sympathy for Rizwan and the struggles he encountered due to being autistic, which is the same preferred reading as the first two films. Interestingly, I primarily interpreted the film in alignment with this reading on the basis that hegemonic masculinity was not as clearly displayed as it was in *Adam* and *Mozart and the Whale*. Rizwan Khan's entire storyline centered on him rekindling a heterosexual relationship. While this is a facet of hegemonic masculinity, his character was

significantly more invested in clearing his name rather than establishing and maintaining dominance over women and other men. He did not exhibit the same desire for control in the relationship or adhere to the expectation that his ideas should be valued above the ideas of others. Unpacking his character revealed that his autistic masculinity was largely benevolent, or at least benign, but the same cannot be said for Adam and Donald in the other films. Thus, while I still contend that *My Name is Khan* should be analyzed through a gendered lens and did so in my project, it is not as problematic to view the film in accordance with the preferred reading. This text is not masking or downplaying problematic hegemonic masculinity because such ideals are not nearly as prevalent, and as such it does not contribute to the normalization of harmful conduct like the earlier films.

Taken as a whole, my analysis makes clear that representations of autism in popular media must be examined intersectionally in order to truly understand what messages these portrayals are sending. They are distributing narratives of hegemonic masculinity and problematic attitudes and behaviors associated with it (using the presence of autism to overshadow and mask them), all while suggesting that viewers should feel sympathy for the characters and place their gender displays above reproach. It is insufficient to consider autism as the exclusive point of inquiry, since autistic people (and media representations of them) are also gendered. However, the preferred readings of the films in my study hinge on autism alone, effectively reducing portrayals of autistic men to nothing more than their disability and dismissing the gendered realities of their narratives. Even though the characters are hegemonically masculine, the preferred reading does not account for these obvious gender performances and instead limits the

autistic characters exclusively to their disability. Through challenging the preferred reading, my analysis made clear that gender and disability cannot be isolated and that the characters' hegemonic masculinities are present and necessary to critique.

Interestingly, because the characters are autistic, they are always already unable to adhere to hegemonic masculinity. Autism prohibits them from aligning completely with gender norms. Even though the autistic characters in my study enacted behaviors that appeal to hegemonic norms, the meaning of this is more complex and complicated. In the context of the films, it is not that the characters simply can be hegemonically masculine, but rather that they are told they *should* be. Adam, Donald, and Rizwan are all told at one point or another that, "this is how you should be a man." They are not and cannot be hegemonically masculine, but the contexts and situations in which they behave and interact with other characters creates a space in which hegemonic masculinity emerges. It is the process of communicating with other characters that produces autistic masculinity, and therefore problematic gender narratives engrained in representations of autistic men are not inherent, but rather are constructed. In other words, autistic masculinity—the juxtaposition of hegemonic masculinity and normative understandings of autism—is an intersectional identity that is neither homogenous nor monolithic, and the fact that the films in my study do not account for this reduces both autism and masculinity to tired stereotypes that are harmful to autistic men. Autism, then, becomes pathologized throughout the films because the characters are depicted as incapable of adhering to gender norms; even when they do, hegemonically masculine behaviors often backfire, for which viewers are supposed to feel sympathy and read the characters as having a childlike innocence and naivety. The characters enact hegemonic masculinity while

simultaneously failing to do so because of autism, furthering the idea that autistic masculinity is a paradoxical process as opposed to a descriptive identity.

All three films contained romantic heterosexual relationships, with *Adam* and *Mozart and the Whale* centering them as the main plot. The autistic male protagonists rely on dialogue and action that they believe (or have been told from non-autistic characters) will make their masculinity recognized; in other words, they desire to be like any other male figure, but they neither know how nor understand the implications of doing so. “Being a man,” in the characters’ minds, is crucial to being accepted, but autism significantly complicates this. This again suggests the paradox of autistic masculinity. Such narratives lend themselves to critical intersectional inquiry which had not previously been attempted. Notably, autistic masculinity cannot be understood separately from race. Adam and Donald’s characters are white, and their whiteness is unremarked upon. The romantic narratives surrounding them are thus simplified; because whiteness is normative in both hegemonic masculinity and autism, the construction of autistic masculinity in the first two films is not complicated. They are pathologized and paradoxical, but also privileged. These characters enjoy white privilege, class privilege, and heterosexual privilege, suggesting that autistic masculinity can still trace and reinforce hegemonic cultural norms. In doing so, the white male physical body is idealized, and these films do little to advance diverse representations in film despite depicting autistic men.

Even though *My Name is Khan* makes race visible, Rizwan’s autistic masculinity is still constructed with heterosexual and class privileges and is judged against the same idealized white male physical body. It is because of his race that his hegemonic

masculinity gets diminished and the narrative surrounding him is positioned as more complicated. Furthermore, because his autistic masculinity is racialized, Khan's autism is pathologized in a different way. His behaviors throughout the film were contextualized not with autism, but with race. By this, I mean that when he enacted his masculinity, other characters in the film did not see his autism; his race, not his disability, was the salient identity. This suggests that autism should be less visible especially if you occupy other marginalized spaces, contributing to the idea that autism is acceptable as long as it is not obvious. In the same vein, *My Name is Khan* reinforces the idea that autism is tied to whiteness by downplaying Rizwan's autism and largely centering his race. This contributes to the pathologization of both race and autism and exacerbates the marginalized space that autistic men of color occupy in the larger popular culture.

Despite the narrow scope of my study, there are notable theoretical implications that should be considered as scholarship about autism continues to evolve. As Conn and Bhugra discussed, media representations of disability are a key element in the medicalization of disabled bodies. The medical concerns associated with autism cannot be isolated from how it is portrayed. In order to disrupt processes of medicalization and offer autistic people access to services that are truly useful and not rooted in the systematic discrimination against disability, it is important to recognize and contest the narrow range of roles into which popular culture relegates them. Considering how other facets of identity intersect with autism allow scholars space to break free from these limited confines and more comprehensively address concerns facing the autistic community. My study tapped into this trajectory through analyzing media representations of autism.

My analysis has implications on a wide array of disciplines, including communication studies, gender studies, and disability studies; however, as evidenced in Chapter Two, little scholarship involves actual autistic men or is conducted for their direct benefit. Most work is done for the benefit of practitioners, family and friends, and allies to the autistic community. It is reasonable to assume that autistic people, including men, have viewed the films in my study (or at least know of them); organizations like Autism Speaks and the Autistic Self Advocacy Network list the texts on their websites as films that should be viewed, although they fail to specify for what exact purpose. Regardless, if autistic men view these films, they are receiving messages about what it means to be a man in this culture. They are being exposed to ideas about masculinity and the ways it should be enacted, only to be simultaneously fed the idea that their disability is of far greater concern to them and to the culture at large. What a disservice popular media are doing to autistic men!

In order to effectively make sense of their lived experience, autistic men should have access to knowledge foregrounded by intersectionality. It is fine to contend that autism is the salient identity so long as there is an understanding that other identities are interconnected with it. Through demonstrating that inseparability of autism and masculinity as portrayed in the film, my study exposes how hegemony and oppressive ideology are interwoven in the text. Autistic men may find this useful in everyday social interaction by allowing them to conceptualize how other people interpret their language and behavior; just because they do not detect sexism, misogyny, or toxic masculinity in their interpersonal relationships does not mean these ideals are not present. I unpacked these messages in my study and discussed how they are problematic specifically in



context of autism, opening up the possibility for autistic men to develop an accessible method to critically analyze their social lives and cultivate more fruitful relationships beyond the cultural confines of autistic masculinity.

This project emerged from relatively recent scholarship on the intersection of autism and gender and how autistic identities are represented in media. These bodies of inquiry are underdeveloped; my study addressed only one of the innumerable gaps that future research should consider as this scholarly arena continues to grow. More analysis on media representations of autism is necessary, especially regarding depictions of lower functioning autistic characters and autistic women. Additionally, there is a severe lack of insight into how autistic people *actually* relate to media representations about them. While educated hypotheses can and have been made (in my study and others), there remains an obvious absence of real data in this area. Lastly, there is ample room for continued inquiry into how autistic identities (both actual and depicted) are gendered, raced, and classed and the impacts that this has on autistic lived experiences, the intersection of autism and medicine, and public policy.

*Adam*, *Mozart and the Whale*, and *My Name is Khan* all establish preferred readings regarding autistic masculinity. Using the theoretical contributions of Stuart Hall and R.W. Connell, I did not interpret these films in the ways that producers may have intended; instead, I found that oppressive hegemonic ideas about masculinity were strategically downplayed as a result of the characters being autistic. Additionally, I discovered that these problematic notions of gender were not only as powerful as the stereotypical portrayals of autism, but rather inseparable from them. Autistic masculinity is an intersectional identity that hinges on both privileging masculinity and appealing to

limited ideas about autism, and it is important to understand how media represent this in order for autistic men to more effectively navigate the culture.

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