

Don't Get Stuck

Austin Mac

University of California, Santa Barbara

Don't Get Stuck

Imagine being a prisoner in your own body, unable to communicate with the rest of the world. For many individuals affected by autism, this hypothetical is a reality. Fundukian & Wilson (2008) defined autism as a developmental disorder characterized by “severe impairments in social interaction, communication, and patterns of rigid, repetitive behaviors. . . . [some of which] must be exhibited before the age of three” (p. 109). These impairments may manifest themselves in the form of lack of eye contact, lack of empathy, and strong repetitive action. Although the initial stages of autism are not present in Levinson’s *Rain Man*, autistic symptoms are accurately portrayed by the character Raymond Babbitt. Raymond is what Hughes (2018) would’ve classified as an autistic savant, a person with autism who shows extraordinary mental talents in math, art, or memorization (“Background”). In this comedy-drama, Raymond and his brother Charlie illustrate the complications of living with autism as they travel across the country. Because of the genre of the film, viewers lose a serious perspective on autism. Additionally, the narrow focus of the film doesn’t account for the general population of individuals with autism. However, Levinson’s work allows viewers to gain an emotional understanding of the difficulties of living with the disorder.

While comedic films encourage laughter, the jocular manner in which serious issues are portrayed makes them seem less important than they really are. In the case of *Rain Man*, Levinson poked fun at Raymond’s behavior. When the two brothers are on the way to Los Angeles, Raymond is supposed to wear Charlie’s underwear. However, an uncomfortable Raymond unexpectedly removes the underwear, creating an atmosphere of humor. Despite the zany tone, the film makes light of certain autistic tendencies. Raymond removes his underwear

because it doesn't say his name on it, they are too tight, and they aren't the right brand.

Fundukian & Wilson (2008) offered an explanation for his discomfort, stating "autistic individuals can be extremely sensitive to change" (p. 110). In a different setting, viewers would recognize the seriousness of the discomfort. However, because viewers are too busy laughing, they fail to feel the gravity of the situation. Life for those affected by autism could be made more difficult if people are ignorant and fail to respect their boundaries. Thus, by making a laughingstock out of Raymond, the audience doesn't notice the severity of change to those affected by autism.

Comedy also overshadows the issue of social awareness. When Raymond walks in on Charlie and Susanna having sex, it is viewed through a humorous lens. However, viewers don't see the issue of autistic individuals showing "a kind of indifference to other people" (Fundukian & Wilson, 2008). They only see a clumsy man stumbling where he doesn't belong. Raymond doesn't infer from the sights and sounds that he is not welcome in the room. He acts regardless of what his brother may have desired. By making light of this moment, Levinson showed that the unawareness that autistic individuals exhibit is not a big deal. This mindset is dangerous because letting an uninformed individual roam free can put him in potentially harmful situations, especially if that individual is incapable of taking into account implicit or explicit social cues. Since the audience is distracted by the funny scene, they can't understand the dangers of social unawareness.

In addition to losing a serious perspective, viewers lose a generalized point of view since they're only presented with one case: the case of an autistic savant. By portraying Raymond as a savant, Levinson perpetuated a misconception that all autistic people have extraordinary mental

abilities, when in reality, only a small minority do. Only 10% of people with autism actually have savant abilities (Edelson, n.d.), a statistic which is far lower than the film might convey. The emphasis on one shining star may lead viewers to believe that savants are much more common than they really are.

One of the implications of this misconception is that people with autism may be treated differently. Because it is assumed that autistic individuals may possess supernatural abilities, they may be exploited for their talents. Raymond Babbitt experiences this very exploitation by his brother, Charlie, when he is taken to Las Vegas to count cards after demonstrating a gift for mathematics. People affected by autism should be respected just like the rest of the population. By portraying Raymond as a genius, the director makes it seem like everyone with autism possesses these abilities. This stereotype may encourage unfair and unethical exploitation of members of our society. Thus the audience loses a sense of proportion of the abilities of autistic people.

Despite the aspects of autism lost in the transition to film, Levinson brilliantly illustrated the difficulties of emotional communication with autistic individuals. After kissing Susanna, Charlie's girlfriend, Raymond expresses no emotional response to the act. When asked how he liked the kiss, Raymond responds, "wet," revealing how he perceives the world in a more literal sense and in less of an emotional way. Levinson's depiction of autism is quite accurate in this scenario since Fundukian & Wilson (2008), reported how autistic people show an "inability to respond to social situations or other people's emotions with empathy" (p. 111). The close camera angle gives the audience an intimate look at the lack of any facial expression. The audience is literally presented with a human face to examine emotion for themselves. Rather than simply

reading words from a book, pop-culture is a more effective vessel to cast the struggle of showing emotion.

In addition to emotional communication, people are able to better understand the difficulties of verbal communication. Throughout the film, Raymond speaks repetitively, making communication difficult. At Walbrook, he constantly repeats, "I'm an excellent driver," and "slow on the driveway," illustrating "repetitive and stereotyped use of language" (Fundukian & Wilson, p. 111) common in people with autism. Talking to Raymond is difficult. He reiterates, "yeah," after being asked if he wants to stay with his brother or return to Walbrook, confusing everyone. The scene is framed for the audience to root for Raymond to stay with his brother, but when he responds "yeah" to every question, viewers feel the same exact emotion as Charlie: frustration. By setting up the scene so that the audience can participate and feel what Charlie feels, Levinson made his audience live the emotional aspect of autism. Emotions are much better portrayed in a face-to-face context rather than through descriptive words. Because viewers empathize better through film than scientific articles, they become more sensitive to the struggles of verbal communication.

Difficulties in communication also lead to difficulties in care for individuals affected by autism. *Rain Man* demonstrates the amount of effort required to make a person with autism comfortable. The difficulty arises from the need to maintain a certain type of environment, since autistic individuals require "a need for rigid adherence to specific routines or rituals in daily life" (Fundukian & Wilson, 2008, p. 111). When travelling across the country, Raymond requires certain constants in his life such as syrup on the table before pancakes arrive, a bed next to the window, or bedtime at 11:00. These routines make Charlie frustrated since he has to cater to his

brother's every need. Although one could read about this in a book, the toll it takes on a person is much more apparent through film since we get to see Charlie Babbitt become frustrated. In the process, we become frustrated as well, since seemingly mundane tasks must be completed to painstakingly exact specifications. We're able to empathize with Charlie about how apparently unnecessary these precautions are.

The struggle that caretakers undergo may contribute to the general attitude towards people with autism. *Rain Man* exemplifies this sentiment towards autism better than scientific articles. Huws (2010) reported, "There was also a belief that people with autism were somehow trapped or confined within their own bodies, and that it was this that could lead to communication difficulties" (pp. 331 - 344). Charlie experiences this same idea when he loses patience trying to talk to his brother. Charlie exclaims, "I think this autism is a bunch of shit 'Cause you can't tell me that you're not in there somewhere." Charlie's burst of anger stems from the fact that he thinks Raymond is just "hiding" inside his body. Levinson encapsulated the frustration of trying to deal with an uncooperative autistic individual by making Charlie Babbitt explode. Since the audience is able to see the tipping point of someone who's lost his patience, they're able to get a better understanding of how much patience is required. Watching someone get angry has an undoubtedly greater effect on an observer than simply reading about it. Film is more powerful.

Due to the nature of comedy, the audience gets a few laughs at the expense of a realistic perspective. The extent of the focus on the autistic savant steers our attention away from the general population affected by autism. But, this focus highlights the struggles of living with a person with the developmental disorder. Throughout Raymond and Charlie's journey, viewers

are presented with a few misleading depictions of autism. They see only what life is like as an autistic savant, a rare case. When viewing films like *Rain Man*, it becomes imperative to separate real life from comedic action, especially since some of the implicit messages in the movie promote ignorance. Despite these negatives, film describes aspects of the disorder that we wouldn't otherwise be able to notice. Our eyes are opened to how autistic individuals act. At the same time, we're introduced to the difficulty of living with someone affected by the disorder. Film portrays emotional responses, allowing viewers to comprehend the nature of autism. Reading about an issue is no longer good enough, and if we continue pursuing solutions just by reading about them, we risk getting stuck in our own little worlds. We must emphasize experience and observation in order to resist ignorance, because ignorance may be the worst handicap of all.

References

Edelson, S. M., (n.d.). Research: Autistic savants. *Autism Research Institute*, Retrieved from https://www.autism.com/understanding_savants

Fundukian, L. J., & Wilson, J. (2008). Autism. *The Gale Encyclopedia of Mental Health*, 1, 109-114. Retrieved from <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=GVRL&u=ucsantabarbara&id=GALE|CX2699900047&v=2.1&it=r&sid=GVRL&asid=9fae330c#>

Hughes, J. E. A., Ward, J., Gruffydd, E., Baron-Cohen, S., Smith, P., Allison, C., & Simner, J. (2018). Savant syndrome has a distinct psychological profile in autism. *Molecular Autism*, 9(1). Retrieved from <https://molecularautism.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13229-018-0237-1>

Huws, J. C., & Jones, R. S. P., (2010). ‘They just seem to live their lives in their own little world’: Lay perceptions of autism. *Disability & Society*, 25(3). Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687591003701231?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

Levinson, B. (Director). *Rain man* [Motion picture]. CA: MGM

National Autistic Society. (n.d.). *Obsessions, repetitive behaviour and routines*. Retrieved from <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/obsessions-repetitive-routines.aspx>