Two Portrayals of Developmental Disability

The films *Rain Man* (1988) and *Dominick and Eugene* (1988) both depict the life of a man with a developmental disability and his relationship with a younger brother. Both films are careful to portray their main characters as being “special,” that is, as having special skills or qualities, rather than simply disabled, retarded, or stupid. The acting, camera work, script and plot convey fairly realistic portrayals of two very different disabilities, autism and mild mental retardation. The characters display the behaviors, successes, failures, and relationships which are true-to-life for persons with their respective disabilities. However, *Dominick and Eugene* is the more realistic of the two films. Both movies make use of humor and sentiment, but not in such a way that is overblown or unrealistic. The most accurate and important message put forth in both movies is that loved ones need to accommodate to disabled persons rather than expect them to change or be cured.

The directors and actors involved in *Rain Man* as well as in *Dominick and Eugene* clearly did much research in order to assure that the disabilities depicted in the movies were accurately portrayed. The behaviors and actions of Raymond and Nicky are realistic. In the case of Raymond the autistic characteristics of repeated rituals, obsessive behaviors, resistance to change are all skillfully displayed by Dustin Hoffman. The savant skills shown in the film, and some other specific behaviors were in fact based on real individuals.¹ Dustin Hoffman studied many

¹ [http://www.wisconsinmedicalsocieity.org/savant/rainman.cfm](http://www.wisconsinmedicalsocieity.org/savant/rainman.cfm)
tapes and real life cases of persons with autism and savant disorder. Raymond’s idiosyncrasy of eating cheeses ball with toothpicks, while seemingly a corny element added for humor, was in fact based on a behavior of a real autistic person. While many such behaviors were authentic, they were a composite of many different people. The movie was somewhat misleading in that Raymond combined several such behaviors in one person. Also, savant syndrome and autism are much more mutually exclusive than what might be assumed just from watching this film, only one out of ten autistic persons display any savant skills.\(^2\)

Like Dustin Hoffman, Tom Hulce is also very successful in portraying Nicky as a character with many of the characteristics typical of someone with mental retardation. For example, Nicky is depicted as being very childlike. The first time we see him he is playing and talking with his dog much as a child would. When his friend suggests he pursue sex with a local woman, Nicky chooses instead to read comic books with a neighborhood child. He is also very emotionally sensitive and easily distracted due to a short attention span. He has difficulty remembering things, for example he forgets to walk the dog. Nicky has trouble with self care, another typical characteristic of someone with mental retardation.

Both films are fundamentally about the relationship between a disabled and non-disabled brother. The movies effectively relate the extreme difficulty loved ones have in dealing with a disabled family member. In both films there is a focus on the tension between deep love and the anger, resentment, and frustration that arises when dealing with someone with such special needs.

The two films portray some small successes for their main characters. Raymond becomes a bit more self-sufficient and tolerates some affection. Nicky makes pretty big progress in that he decides he is self sufficient enough to live without his brother for awhile. He is very

\(^2\) Ibid.
successful (or happy at least) with his job and has several good relationships, such as with Mrs. Gianelli and Larry, his work friend. Nicky also has a significant mental breakthrough when he is able to remember that his father abused him as a child. The two men’s success however do not revolve around overcoming their specific disorders but through other qualities which they possess, sometimes qualities which are a part of their disorders. In Raymond’s case, his savant skills are part of what make him such an exceptional individual. Nicky also has many wonderful qualities related to his child-like innocence. He is very loving, kind and sweet and always cheerful and trusting. As such he has many friends in the neighborhood and is described as “God’s child.” He is also physically very strong. This other quality is highlighted at the joyful end scene where he is trying to move the water heater by himself. The majority of the movie is rather dark and quiet, but in this last scene the lighting is very bright and there is uplifting music.

The way in which these movies do not shy away from portraying the inevitable failures people like Raymond or Nicky will likely face is another very realistic element. In the movie Rain Man this is made clear at the end of the film when Charlie is meeting with the expert psychologist and Raymond cannot distinguish or choose between his brother and the institution. This is a crucial scene because it shows the stark reality of his situation. Even though his character and behavior have been treated fairly lightly previously – Raymond says funny things and looks cute most of the time and only once or twice has short little tantrums- this scene conveys the seriousness of his disorder. Although he has made some progress it is very slight and was exaggerated by his brother. Even the slight progress which Raymond makes in this short time is a little unrealistic in that it would probably be only temporary – even though the movie leaves the viewer perhaps thinking otherwise.
The complicated emotions and severe disabling aspects of Nicky’s mental retardation are much more carefully depicted through the acting of Tom Hulce. This is especially true in the climactic scene where Nicky watches a young boy get killed by his father. Nicky’s face freezes as he watches the father mistreat and yell at the boy. He is terrified and cannot act. After he realizes the terrible thing he has just witnessed he sits down outside the house. As various characters come in and out of his first person view, they are all seen from the waist up, effectively lending the viewer the feeling of total helplessness and desperation which Nicky is feeling as the scene unfolds. Nicky “freaks out” in a way in which someone without such a disorder would not, he does not have the coping skills to deal with the situation. The camera work, quickly shifting between various characters and prolonged close-ups of Nicky’s petrified face helps to contribute to the panicked tone of the scene. After the initial shock has worn off Nicky still does not know how to effectively respond to what has happened. Instead of talking to his brother or the police he acts out and steals the man’s baby in an attempt to keep him safe from harm. The following chain of events is ended rather too neatly, and it is really only by chance that Nicky does not end up in jail. Even though he makes progress throughout the film in becoming more independent, the scene makes it clear that he will always need help in dealing with day-to-day life. The scene where he is trying to lift the water heater at the end of the film is emblematic of this. Although he is very strong, Nicky needs the help of his friends in order to do haul the heavy object. Nonetheless, he is independent enough by this time to separate from his brother.

These two films deal with very different disabilities. Rain Man is the less realistic of the two dramas given the more out-there script (which however makes for a more exciting movie) and the overblown cuteness and humor of the Raymond character which underplays the
seriousness of his disability. However, Dustin Hoffman does a credible job portraying the typical behaviors and deadpan facial expressions of an autistic man. Nicky’s story is more realistic and his character is portrayed by Tom Hulce with more nuance. Both movies use humor and sentiment, *Dominick and Eugene* more subtly and therefore more effectively. Both movies are helpful in teaching us about developmental disabilities, and accurately show us that loved ones need to make accommodations for people with developmental disabilities, rather than expecting the disabled person to change or undergo a miraculous cure.

*Works Cited*


Wisconsin Medical Society home page.