

## **Friday Night Disability: The Portrayal of Parent-Child Interactions on Television's *Friday Night Lights***

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### Article abstract

Studies of television portrayals of parent/child relationships where the child has a disability are rare. Using the social relational theory perspective, this study examines interactions between parents and a young man with a disability as portrayed in the acclaimed contemporary television series, *Friday Night Lights*. We found a nuanced relationship between the portrayed teen and his parents and a powerful influence of the community on the parent-child relations and family life.

## Friday Night Disability: The Portrayal of Parent-Child Interactions on Television's *Friday Night Lights*

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### Abstract

Studies of television portrayals of parent/child relationships where the child has a disability are rare. Using the social relational theory perspective, this study examines interactions between parents and a young man with a disability as portrayed in the acclaimed contemporary television series, *Friday Night Lights*. We found a nuanced relationship between the portrayed teen and his parents and a powerful influence of the community on the parent-child relations and family life.

**Keywords:** parent-youth relations, disability, social relational theory, film and television, *Friday Night Lights*

### Résumé

Des études portant sur les représentations de relations parent-enfant à la télévision où l'enfant a des incapacités sont rares. À l'aide de la théorie des relations sociales, cette étude observe les interactions entre un jeune homme ayant des incapacités et ses parents dans la télésérie contemporaine *Friday Night Lights*. Nous avons trouvé une relation nuancée entre le jeune homme et ses parents, ainsi qu'une influence importante de la communauté sur les relations parent-enfant et la vie de famille.

**Mots-clés :** relations parent-enfant, incapacité, théorie relations sociales, film et télévision, *Friday Night Lights*

## Introduction

Scholars have been examining the representation of people with disabilities (PWDs) in the media for more than three decades (Black & Barnes, 2015; Elliott & Byrd, 1983; Harris, 2009; McManus et al., 2012; Owen, 2012; Pirkis et al., 2006; Safran, 1998; von Sikorski & Schierl, 2013). The portrayals have varied across disabilities and ranged from positive to negative in tenor, with specific disabilities having unique stereotypes attached to them and characters with disabilities themselves being constructed both favorably and less so, depending on the types of disabilities that they might have (Berger, 2015; Hartnett, 2000).

Analogously, researchers from across academic domains including psychology (Baker, Baker, & Crnic, 2014), nursing (Kearney & Griffin, 2001) and mental health (Kubicek et al., 2013) have also studied family relationships as they are portrayed off-screen (Lightsey & Sweeney, 2008; Little, 2001; Rieger & McGrail, 2013; 2015), including families with children with disabilities. Because the parent-child dyad is so crucial to the development of children, it tends to be a strong predictor of the absorption of values, morals and general behavioral norms in them, in conjunction with children's interactions with those with whom they are closest — primarily their parents and guardians (Kuczynski & Hildebrandt, 1997; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007). However, little research is available that combines the examination of parent-child relationships within the larger body of work on mass media portrayals of PWDs, particularly in the ubiquitous medium of television. This study is intended to partly fill that gap by examining interactions between parents and a youth with a disability as portrayed in the contemporary television series, *Friday Night Lights* (Berg, 2007).

### - Current Literature

Scholars agree that overall, people with disabilities are both underrepresented and misrepresented in film and television (Agosto, 2014; Armstrong, 2004; Crow, 2013; Devlieger et al.,

2008; Wahl et al., 2007; Warzak et al., 1998). Scherman (2008) analyzed full-length Disney Films produced between 1930 and 2010 to determine the frequency of main characters with physical disabilities. She found that 13, or 7%, of the 178 analyzed films featured characters with physical disabilities. Based on the preliminary body of research examined for the current study, physical disabilities and mental illness are the two types of disabilities most commonly portrayed. Most recently, portrayals of autism, a neurological disorder, are a rising focus of research in movies and television programs (Hannam, 2014; Marinan, 2014).

Black and Pretes (2007) defined six media stereotypes of characters with disabilities. They are: "pitiabile and pathetic; supercrip; sinister, evil and criminal; better — off dead; maladjusted, his or her own worst enemy; a burden, and unable to live a successful life" (p. 67). These stereotypes are based somewhat on the early work of Biklen and Bogdan (1977) and Nelson (1994). Black and Pretes (2007) found that among the 18 films that they analyzed, the most commonly portrayed stereotype was one in which the disabled person was unable to live a successful life. Hartnett (2000) argues that one important reason that persons with disabilities have been othered and marginalized is that they are not seen in popular media as part of the structure of intimate society, that is, as members of families and of networks of friends. However, none of the themes and/or stereotypes Black and Pretes (2007) explored focused specifically on the relationship between the main character who was a PWD and his or her family. This is despite the fact that young people with a disability usually require the investment of larger inventories of time from their parents or guardians than is otherwise typical of children of commensurate age (Rieger & McGrail, 2013).

An additional research focus within the existing body of literature examines how negative portrayals of PWDs impact viewers with and without disabilities (England, 2008; Hannam, 2014; Holton, Farrel, & Fudge, 2014; Kama, 2004; Rider, 1994; von Sikorski & Schierl, 2014). Zhang and Haller (2013) surveyed more



than 300 PWDs to determine their viewpoints regarding the portrayal of people with disabilities in the media. Zhang and Haller's (2013) research suggests that "people with disabilities are more likely to develop positive and confident self-identity when exposed to media stories about the accomplishments of individuals with disabilities" (p. 330).

Schwartz et al., (2010) used the medium of documentaries to examine the reaction of graduate students, faculty and staff, and community members to depictions of PWDs during an annual college-sponsored film festival. Their results indicate that viewing realistic portrayals can influence public perception about people living with disabilities.

Although none of these or many other studies focus on the families of PWDs, one researcher (Holton, 2013) does examine parent/child relationships in the NBC television program *Parenthood* (Katims, 2010). In the depicted family the youngest son, Max, is diagnosed with autism. Holton argues that common stereotypes are re-enforced by the show's treatment of Max as a detached loner oblivious to the experiences of those around him. Holton also argues that the show gives no voice to Max, as the parents' perspective dominates the storyline. More recently, Hasson (2016) emphasized the challenges that the parents in this series face in dealing with school administrators and outside support services, although giving less attention to the parent-child relationships and interaction in their analysis.

We find, therefore, that there has been significant scholarly interest in media depictions of PWDs, somewhat less interest in how the media portray familial relations (Berry, 1998; Ferguson, 2010; Skill & Wallace, 1990), but quite scant interest in the two areas taken together.

While the number of programs on television that focus on PWDs has been small, a few high profile programs have provided portrayals. Fink (2013) examined the portrayal of people with disabilities on the long-running series, *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989). Their analysis revealed a "carnavalesque" portrayal of people

with disabilities, much like the off-screen practice of travelling freak shows documented by Bogdan (1993, 1988). This may have been made easier by the fact that *The Simpsons* is a cartoon, in which realism is not generally a goal (Mittell, 2001). Investigations of the live-action program that we treat, *Friday Night Lights*, as a text are plentiful, and a few treat the issue of disability (e.g. Cherney & Lindemann, 2014; Ellis, 2012) but they generally do not concern the familial relations of a PWD, even though such relations are important to the plot of the first two seasons of this program.

Skill and Wallace (1990) provided the only study that we could find that focused primarily on the power dynamics between parents and children on prime-time television, the genre to which our program of interest belongs. They studied the composition of television families, as well as the type and frequency of parent/child interactions displayed. They found that members of "in-tact" families were less likely to assert power than those of "non in-tact and mixed families" (p. 259).

Research on the off-screen, real-life relationships between parents and children with disabilities was also pertinent to the current study. Volumes have been written on this subject from the standpoint of educators (Burke & Hodapp, 2014), medical professionals (Kaplan, 2014), social scientists (McStay et al., 2014; Meirschaut, Roeyers, & Warreyn, 2011), and advocates for the advancement of PWDs (Chadwick et al., 2013; Farrell & Krahn, 2014).

For the purposes of comparing media portrayals with real life, we located a representative sample of articles published within the last ten years that centered on the relationships between children and/or adolescents with disabilities and their family members. The common thread throughout the research surveyed was that parents of children with disabilities generally report higher levels of stress overall than parents of typically developing children (Darling, Senatore, & Strachan, 2011; Hayes & Watson, 2012; Weitlauf, Vehorn, Tylor, & Warren, 2014).

Huang, Ososkie, and Hsu (2011) found that "negative feelings of parental favoritism, negligence and jealousy were commonly experienced by younger siblings of children with disabilities" (p. 223). Baker, Baker, and Crnic (2014) found that mothers of children age 5 and 6 with disabilities showed more "negative controlling" behaviors than that of the mothers with same age, typically developing children (p. 332). Vacca (2013) reported that in his study the most common concerns reported by fathers with autism was around "impaired social interactions" (p. 90).

Whether it is art imitating life or life imitating art, this focus on the family impact of having a child with disabilities appears to validate Holton's (2013) assessment that to date most of the emphasis is put on the other actor(s) and not enough on the individuals with disabilities – both on and off the screen. The studies also tend to foreground the parent, sibling, or caregiver perspective rather than that of the child. Nor do these studies seem to discuss in depth the ways in which the parent *and* the child with disability exercise agency or negotiate power dynamics around the issues of disability.

The current study is therefore designed to extend the existing body of work by asking specific questions that remain relatively unexplored:

- What forms of child-parent interaction and socialization are being portrayed in the popular series, *Friday Night Lights*?
- What forms of child-parent agency occur in these portrayals?
- What assumptions do these portrayals make about parent/child with disability relations today?

#### - Theoretical Framework(s)

To study the portrayals of parent-child interactions, we employed and modified as required Kuczynski's (2003) select constructs from his bilateral conceptual framework, social relational theory which was developed to study "dynamics in parent-child relations" (p. 4).

Lollis and Kuczynski (1997) argued that "research on parent-child interactions tends to

have a microanalytic perspective that considers bidirectional influence within social interactions but neglects bidirectional influences between social interactions and the encompassing long-term relationship" (p. 441). According to social relational theory, reciprocity in attitudes, behaviors, and responses between children and parents in the parent-child relationship is a form of socialization (Newton, Laible, Carlo, Steele, & McGinley, 2014). Importantly, socialization within this theoretical perspective is framed as a bidirectional process, rather than a unidirectional activity. That is, unlike "the traditional depiction of the parent-child relationship exclusively as a vertical power arrangement" (Kuczynski & Hildebrandt, 1997, p. 236), interactions between parents and children within the family structure are based on a bilateral model: each actor in the dyad influences the other, and each affects the efficacy of the overall socialization of the other. To this end, social and cultural gains made by both the parent and child are thought to be mutual rather than independent of one another.

Accepting that parents modify their own behavior and expectations to some degree based on the interactions with their children yields a viewpoint of dialectic causality.

Dialectic causality emphasizes the inherent contradictions that exist within individuals and their various contexts as well as the generative qualitative transformations that result as these elements actively interact with each other... Through this process novel forms emerge constantly during development and also in the course of short-term problem solving, such as during social interaction. (Kuczynski, 2003, p. 7)

Within this relational process, human agency is brought to the forefront and is assigned a dialectical function (Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2009). Kuczynski and Parkin (2007) argued that parents and children act as "agents in socialization" when they interact with one another (p. 260). That is, they both have the capacity to influence the other and to exert power in response to agency exercised by the other. This study seeks to understand the



forms of socialization in interactions between a youth with a disability and his parents, as portrayed in the high-profile network television series, *Friday Night Lights* (Berg, 2007). Examining the direction (unilateral or bilateral), the nature of influence (power and agency arrangements), and the resources employed in interaction with each other, and the type of socialization from the relational perspective are the factors that this study sought to uncover.

Of course, the parent/child dyad with and within disability is different from that in which disability is not a feature. Setting aside for a moment the problematic nature of disability as a “tragedy” (Glasscock, 2000; Hayes & Black, 2003; Preston, 2014; Rogers, 2007), parenting a child who has or acquires a disability involves a vastly greater marshalling of emotional, financial and social resources (Darling, Senatore, & Strachan, 2011; Farrell & Krahn, 2014; Hayes & Watson, 2012). Rieger and McGrail (2013; 2015) noted that humor was often an anodyne to these challenges, and was found to be a force for better family functioning and a powerful communicative force when employed between young PWDs and their parents.

More recently, probably because of the effort not to demean PWDs or to otherwise give overt offense, a construction of PWDs as “supercrips” has been noted by several scholars (Fink, 2013; Hartnett, 2000; Holton, 2013; Kama, 2004). “Generally, the supercrip is recognized as a stereotypical representation of disability that appears in contemporary journalism, television, film and fiction” (Schalk, 2016, p. 73). In addition, “[S]upercrip narratives emphasize (over) compensation for the perceived ‘lack’ created by disability” (Schalk, 2016, p. 74).

It was therefore important to us in our selection of a media text to choose one that placed a young PWD in a setting in which popular heroism was very much in the background, as it is in the series, *Friday Night Lights*.

## Methodology

### - Data Collection/Choice of Subject Matter - *Friday Night Lights*

The data source for this qualitative study (Creswell, 2007) is a selection of scenes portraying parent/child-with-disability interactions in the television NBC series, *Friday Night Lights* (Berg, 2007). Although we examined all five of its aired seasons, seasons 3-5 did not include any instances of interactions between the parent(s) and the teen with a disability and so were not discussed.

This television program was selected for this analysis because it was one of the few recent programs that met the following criteria:

- a) it was fictional in nature;
- b) it featured a youth with a disability in a key role;
- c) it had a parent or caregiver in a supporting or an important role;
- d) it was a television program in wide release;
- e) it was created in the modern television era (post-1990).

Out of the 76 total episodes of the five seasons aired from 2006-2011, there were 16 instances of high intensity and one instance of low intensity interactions between the parent(s) and Jason Street, the teen with a disability (see Table 1). These interactive scenes occurred over seven episodes of season 1 and three episodes of season 2 for a total of approximately 13 minutes of the approximately 26 hours and 45 minutes. (There were many other scenes that concerned Jason Street and his interactions with others, but these did not feature his parents in any way, and were not treated.)

While a few programs may have more generally fit our criteria, we decided to focus on the NBC series *Friday Night Lights* for several reasons. First, “the show remains one of the few prime-time television series to portray disability in the context of sport” (Cherney & Lindemann, 2014, p. 2). It was also critically acclaimed, having won the Television Critics Association Award in 2007 for Outstanding New Program of

**TABLE 1. FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS: SCENES THAT FIT THE SELECTION CRITERIA**

Selected Scene/Season/Episode (Approximate time code)	High Incidence (Major) A few keywords to label and code the scene	Low Incidence (Minor) A few keywords to label and code the scene
<b>Season One</b>		
<b>Disc 1</b> Season 1/ Episode 1: Pilot		
35:01-36:05; <b>Length:</b> 1:04 min	Jason's disabling spine injury on the field	
45:13-45:21; <b>Length:</b> 00:08 sec.		Family gathers around Jason's bed after his unsuccessful surgery
<b>Disc 1</b> Season 1/Episode 2.Eyes Wide Open		
24:01-24:36; <b>Length:</b> 00:35 sec	Doctor comments on Jason's irrevocable disabled condition	
Season 1 <b>Disc 1</b> /Episode 3: Wind Sprints		
40:11-41:16; <b>Length:</b> 1:05 min	Jason leaves hospital; parents help with the move to rehab facility	
Season 1 <b>Disc 2</b> /Episode 3 : Homecoming		
13:23-14:02; <b>Length:</b> 00:39 sec.	Jason makes college plans with parents	
28:40-29:44; <b>Length:</b> 1:04 min	Jason wheels onto the football field as an honorary captain	
Season 1/ <b>Disc 3</b> /Episode 10: It's Different for Girls		
2:39-4:20; <b>Length:</b> 1:41 min	Jason returns home from rehab	
6:48-7:40; <b>Length:</b> 00:52	Jason's first morning at home after his return from rehab	
17:24-18:52; <b>Length:</b> 1:29 min	Jason's interview with the lawyer	
Season 1/ <b>Disc 3</b> /Episode 11: Nevermind		
1:53-2:39; <b>Length:</b> 00:44 sec.	Jason has an argument with his mother about a lost music CD	
Season 1/ <b>Disc 3</b> /Episode 12:What to Do While You're Waiting		
7:48-9:16; <b>Length:</b> 1:28 min.	Jason disagrees with parents about coach's responsibility for his injury	
Season 1/ <b>Disc 5</b> /Episode 20: Mud Bowl		
6:32-7:05; <b>Length:</b> 00:33 sec.	Parents worried about Jason's future	
<b>Season Two</b>		
Season 2/ <b>Disc 1</b> /Episode 1: Last Days of Summer		
43:57-43:59; <b>Length:</b> 00:02 sec.	Parents watch Jason receive the championship ring	
Season 2/ <b>Disc 3</b> /Episode 9: The Confession		
6:15-6:38; <b>Length:</b> 00:23 sec	Mother brings a snack to Jason's bedroom	
36:20-36: 28; <b>Length:</b> 00:08 sec.	Jason comes home late; parents had been worrying all night about his whereabouts	
40:31-40:50; <b>Length:</b> 00:19 sec.	Jason moves out to live on his own; parents help with the move	



the Year (tvcritics.org) and having received the award for Outstanding Achievement in Drama by the Television Critics Association in 2011. For its first two seasons, it enjoyed a viewership of roughly 6 million (Gorman, 2010).

Moreover, many of the critics who praised the show spoke of the show's naturalistic settings and dramatic realism, especially concerning themes such as teen sexual discovery, death and murder, dashed athletic hopes, financial privation, educational competition, and many others that resonate in our current cultural *zeitgeist* (Cole, 2011; Heffernan, 2006; Shales, 2006). We therefore thought it instructive to observe whether the show's realism would in some sense carry over to its portrayal of adolescent disability in parent/child relations.

#### - Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis (Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2000) using the social relational theory perspective was employed to examine social interactions between parents and the teenager with a disability, Jason Street, based on the bilateral model of parent-child relations (Kuczynski & Hildebrandt, 1997; Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2009). Qualitative content analysis was selected because it can be applied to the analysis of text as well as any form of communication, including video data. Both screen script, where available, and audio-visual data (the televisual aspects of the program itself) were the data sources for this study. Our qualitative content analysis also allowed examining the overt and covert meanings in the portrayals of parent-child with disability interactions in our study.

In addition, the qualitative content analysis we performed is a "theory-guided analysis" (Kohlbacher, 2006, para. 4.2.2.2 Basic ideas), with theory playing a critical role in identifying and analyzing units of analysis and categories of codes associated with these units, as relevant to the research question(s). More specifically, the constructs of context "as interaction within relationships" (p. 7), "power as "interdependent asymmetry" (p. 14) and resources as "constituting power," (p. 15), which are bor-

rowed from the bidirectional model by Kuczynski (2003), were employed to define, identify and analyze the units of analysis and categories of codes associated with these units in our television series of interest. We explored the following research interests of importance to this study:

- a) the parent/child-with-disability dynamics (unilateral or bilateral) in the portrayed relations;
- b) the nature of influence (power and agency arrangements);
- c) the resources used by children and parents to negotiate these relations;
- d) the assumptions governing these portrayals that are read as social representations of disability today.

To accomplish these goals, three procedures from qualitative content analysis techniques were adapted. "Summary," which aims at reducing the material to a manageable corpus through paraphrase and abstraction of data; "Explication," which involves "explaining, clarifying and annotating the material"; and "Structuring," which consists of "filter[ing] out a particular structure from the material", with a specific theoretical basis. As a result, definitions for each coding category were developed and they were accompanied with examples and rules specific to this category (See Table 2). Category definitions and rules formed "a coding agenda". During the first round of coding, "the data locations" were identified and indexed on a timeline. During the second round of coding, the relevant data selections were "processed and extracted" (Kohlbacher, 2006, para. 4.2.2.3 Method and procedures).

Multiple coders were used, coding the data first independently and then together, via the use of an agreed-upon coding agenda, whilst checking for both intercoder reliability (consistency of coding across coders) and intracoder reliability (consistency of the coding of one coder) (Kohlbacher, 2006). Of our four authors, two served as coders and two served as auditors, making sure that factual statements made were evidenced in the text.

**TABLE 2 CODING AGENDA FOR *FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS***

Category	Definition	Examples	Coding Rules/Notes
C1: Individual Resources	Resources that a child or parent possesses independent of each other, such as physical strength, control over rewards, expertise, and executive functioning (Kuczynski, 2003, p. 16).	Father installs a ramp for Jason's return home (skill and talent). Jason displays athletic ability; his expertise working with football players.	Only a single individual resource must be identifiable to be included.
C2: Relational Resources	Resources that are dependent on the relationship a parent and child share. These resources result from the interaction between the two and vary in degree from dyad to dyad.	The parents modify the house to suit Jason's needs. The parents install modified controls for the truck Jason uses.	Only applicable when the resource is directly tied to the social interaction between parent and child. Could be mother and child, father and child, or mother and father with child.
C3: Cultural Resources	Constraints, rights, and entitlements conveyed to parents and children by the laws and customs governing the culture within which they are interacting (Kuczynski, 2003, p. 17).	Jason describes that a store clerk he has known for years "won't even look at him" [Message: Going against the Panthers is going against the town]. Jason is unable on his own to buy beer; a football friend has to help him. Jason and his parents sue the school (and his coach) to get money to pay for his rehabilitation.	The context of the interaction must be considered both on the micro (e.g., family, neighborhood, town) and macro (e.g., ethnicity, geographical region, generational influences).
C4: Relationships	The people directly involved in the interaction whether it be parent and child, parent to parent, child to peer, etc.	The parents are clapping and smiling as Jason (post-injury) ventures onto the football field; he looks for them in the crowd and gives a wave to them.	The interaction must include two or more characters within one scene.
C5: Enculturation	"a largely unconscious process, whereby individuals learn the ideas and practices of a culture by being enfolded in the culture" (Kuczynski, Navara & Boiger, 2011, p. 174).	Father is deferring to mother's decision to sue the coach [Perhaps father is teaching his son the role of a supportive husband.].	This is in contrast to the idea of socialization which is a conscious act between the parent and the child.



Category	Definition	Examples	Coding Rules/Notes
C6: Socialization	The conscious act of teaching morals, traditions, and values to one's children. (Kuczynski, Navara, & Boiger, 2011, p. 174).	The parents exit Jason's bedroom when they bring him home from the rehabilitation center [to give him some space]. The parents wonder why Jason can't get the Nevermind CD online or to download it; Jason wants the hard copy. (message: practicality rather than sentimentality about an object).	Telling or communicating values through words and actions, rather than just actions alone.
C7: Short term compliance	"Short-term compliance is defined as compliance with a request or prohibition in the immediate situation and usually in the parents' presence" (Kuczynski, 1984, p. 1062).	Jason is swayed by his parents to follow through with the lawsuit.	Compliance is in the presence of the parents.
C8: Long-term compliance	"Long-term compliance is compliance that persists beyond the immediate situation, such as in the parent's absence" (Kuczynski, 1984, p. 1062)	The parents collect and display trophies in Jason's new bedroom [to welcome him home and to share their pride of his accomplishments].	Generalized compliance that occurs across contexts wherein the child's or adolescents' parents are not present.
C9: Context	The setting in which a behavior or interaction occurs.	Jason appears on the field once before his injury, and then later on in the season after his injury with the team. He appears also during Homecoming, and also as the team is presented with the state championship rings for the current season, as former player and current assistant coach.	This involves not only the location, but the individuals (parents, peers, siblings, etc.) present in that particular setting.

**Limitations**

There are a few limitations to this study. First, the data source for this work is a fictional program, not a real life event involving real life participants. This is not to say that the events portrayed in *Friday Night Lights* would not occur or play out in real life as they do on the small screen. Television programming using realism as an aesthetic technique is capable of depicting reality as situations analogous to real

life (Monaco, 2009). Indeed, the series was praised for its naturalistic settings and dramatic realism (Cole, 2011; Heffernan, 2006; Shales, 2006).

Second, this study focuses on one television series, and we recognize that the findings are therefore representative of only this program. Further research would be needed to examine other contemporary television series in the United States and abroad, in order to have a



broader reach and to better understand the social representation of parent-child relations among those both with and without disabilities on television today, and the benefits as well the consequences that accrue from these representations.

## Findings

### *- Dynamics between the Parent and Child with Disability*

In terms of the parent/child with a disability dynamic, *Friday Night Lights* portrays a complex relationship. Jason Street, a teen, is arguably the character whose tragedy sets the series in motion; his debilitating football injury, which is permanent quadriplegia, both removes football for him as a career option and makes the way for another player to move into his spot. The injury affects not only Jason and brings emotional dilemmas for him, but it also "disables" his family: they need to come to terms with his injury and the ensuing consequences. His reaction to all of this, and his parents' struggle to secure a future for Jason, result in a tense and multifaceted relationship. Faced with these challenges, both Jason and his parents find themselves being influenced and influencing the other in ways they have not experienced or considered before, in a bidirectional process that we describe next.

#### Connection and relating to each other

There is evidence of significant emotional connection in the parent-child relations throughout the series. For example, Mitchell and Joanne Street, Jason's parents, and Jason share the same value system concerning the role and importance of sports (i.e., football) in their lives. The parents cheer together with the crowd and encourage their son to win through verbal and non-verbal communication during the weekly games, a cultural event in which they all participate on a regular basis.

Jason and his parents also relate to each other when things don't go well and when they are under a great deal of stress. These latter feelings come to a head when Jason gets hurt and

is down on the ground on the field and to an even greater degree when he is found unconscious after the surgery in the hospital.

It is in these moments, whether they reflect good or challenging times, that we witness reciprocity in attitudes, aspirations and behaviors that are characteristic of a bidirectional power relationship (Kuczynski, 2003) between Jason and his parents. That is, we see both Jason and his parents working together, redefining and renegotiating the nature and direction of influence in decision-making as a family unit and within their relationships, as they embrace their difficult situation and search for ways to confront the problems that arise. Conflicts and emotional upheaval are inherent to this dialectic process.

#### Disconnect and lack of understanding

At other times, Jason and the parents strongly disagree with each other and do not necessarily understand or relate to each other. This is particularly evident in the scenes concerning a proposed lawsuit against the high school where Jason played, and Eric Taylor, Jason's football coach, as a strategy to secure the necessary money to cover medical costs and take care of Jason's needs in the future. Out of loyalty to his coach, Jason strongly opposes this idea.

On a later occasion, Jason and his parents have a charged exchange when he makes the choice to stay out all night without calling them or letting them know. As viewers, we are not privy to whether this was something he had done before the accident or not. However, it is clear that both his mother and father are alarmed and disappointed by his actions. Although his mother is more visibly frustrated and verbal, his father expresses his concern too, but without words. Jason remains calm and agrees that it was irresponsible of him not to check in and that it won't happen again — not because he doesn't plan to stay out all night in the future — but because this has cemented his decision to move out from under his parents' roof.



Empathy (trying to understand and support one another)

There are times in the series when the Street parents and Jason try to reach out to each other and work toward an agreed-upon solution, which in turn reflects a dynamic and mutually responsive (i.e. bidirectional) orientation in their relationships. For example, on one occasion Jason is in his bedroom with a friend perusing a dating web site when his mother enters the room without knocking, offering the two young men cookies and carrots. Jason is embarrassed on multiple levels, but seeing that his mother's intentions are good, he graciously accepts the snack and does not allow his frustrations and/or embarrassment to be known until she exits the scene. This is just one occasion of many in which Jason's conflict between wanting to be independent, and wanting at the same time emotional comfort and support from his mother is evidenced through his facial expressions, words, and actions.

Eventually, Jason's parents come to understand Jason's need to have an independent life and let him move out and live with his friend, Herc, who also uses a wheelchair. Jason, too, begins to understand his parents' position on things, even as to appreciating his parents' efforts to secure money for him in the future and conceding to the lawsuit against his coach. In light of social relational theory (Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2009), the examples above represent a bidirectional socialization process, in which both Jason and his parents influence one another, and as a result, act as "agents in socialization" with one another (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007, p. 260). They help each other understand and relate to their individual feelings and ways of coping with Jason's disability and the challenges it has brought to their daily interactions and across their relationships.

*- Resources Used by the Parent and Child with Disability*

Jason and his parents are depicted as using a range of resources as per the bilateral conceptual framework of Kuczynski (2003), including

individual, relational and cultural resources, to negotiate their social interaction and influencing of each other.

*- Jason*

Initially, when we are introduced to Jason, he relies heavily on his individual resources (talent, expertise, and physical prowess as quarterback). A radio announcer calls him "the number one football player in America." His individual resources are, however, vastly depleted when during a daring move on the football field, he is seriously injured and cannot just get up and walk away. The announcer summarizes this unfortunate turn of events and foreshadows Jason's descent from his pinnacle as quarterback when he narrates to the crowd that he is being "carted off on a stretcher."

Jason uses his emotional strength as a resource to stand for himself at a lawsuit hearing and to make decisions about his future life. Later, he uses the same determination to help him become a successful wheelchair rugby player, an assistant football coach with the Dillon Panthers, and to move out and have a fulfilling life as individual with a disability with a child to support and his own family, career, and business. Jason's personal courage and strength in adversity is also evident when he demands to know the whole truth about his medical condition, and in finding the way to deal with the loss of his sweetheart to his best friend, Tim Riggins.

In terms of relational power, Jason is shown to be able to assert himself when he challenges his parents' plans to mount a lawsuit against the school and Coach Eric Taylor, when he speaks to the coach in the courthouse despite the instructions to not do that, and by speaking for himself at the lawsuit and making an offer to reach a settlement with the high school lawyers. However, he maintains his role as "a good son" in that even when he disagrees with his parents, he is generally respectful to them.

He also contests exterior stereotypical views of him as he desires to be seen as more than "the town cripple" or "the boy in the wheelchair" and

gets a job as a car salesman and as an assistant coach. Taken together, Jason's attitude, beliefs and actions contest the following media stereotypes of individuals with disabilities: "pitiable and pathetic;" "a burden, and "unable to live a successful life" (Black & Pretes, 2007, p. 67).

#### *- Jason's Parents*

The parents as a family unit are shown to resort to several scarce resources such as having to use their own financial wherewithal to cover the costs of Jason's hospital treatment and the necessary renovations in the house and the customization of their van to accommodate Jason's needs as an individual with a disability. They also seek legal counsel to mount the lawsuit against the high school and the coach to secure the money to take care of Jason's needs now and in the future.

In addition, they exercise their executive functioning power on numerous occasions. This is evident when they decide to override Jason's request not to sue the coach and when they discipline Jason when he returns home in the morning after having spent the night out without informing them of his whereabouts. They muster the courage to go against the community and to fight for Jason's money from the high school administration and the coach.

In terms of cultural resources, the parents are shown to draw emotional reinforcement from the community in support of Jason's football career. This form of reinforcement is evident when they share with the community moments of joy, triumph and pride when Jason and his team are doing well, especially when they win the state championship, as well as moments of tension, agitation and disappointment when the team is losing.

From the social relational theory standpoint (Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007), the parents have assumed and acted upon the social roles typically expected of the parents whose child pursues a football career. This is a result of having been subjected to both the enculturation and socialization processes to

which they had all been exposed, owing to living in a small town community whose primary source of entertainment and social activity was football. As part of the enculturation process, the Street parents appear to have been inducted into the Dillon community of football, and they come to embrace the mutual benefits and obligations by their membership in this community.

Town-held rallies, football sponsorship campaigns, and local media reporting and commentary, on the other hand, serve as socialization processes, that is, they are the conscious efforts on the part of the town to instill in Jason's parents, and their quarterback, Jason, "the morals, traditions, and values" (Kuczynski, Navara, & Boiger, 2011, p. 174) that this community associated with the football experience. These were expected to be followed by anyone involved in football in their town. As primary caregivers, the parents passed on these values, traditions and morals to Jason, their son. Through participation in the football games, practice, and other related social events, they were contributing to Jason's enculturation (a subconscious process) into the complex football community relationship.

As for relational means, the parents are depicted as utilizing a variety of resources, albeit often different for each parent. Joanne Street relies heavily on her maternal drive and desire to protect and provide for her only son. We thus hear her say to Jason, "You call me on my cell if you need anything" when she leaves for work and Jason stays home after his return from the rehabilitation center.

Jason's mother is shown to be willing to do whatever it takes to take care of her son. An example of such determination is when she accepts the potential rejection of the community and chooses to go ahead with the lawsuit against the high school and Coach Taylor himself: "I've come to terms with the fact that there are people in this town who aren't gonna understand that."

Religion and faith are other important cultural resources for Jason's mother. They give her



and her son hope for a recovery. This is evident in this response she makes after learning about the medical condition of Jason after his spine surgery, “We’ll keep praying.”

She also uses her intellect and logic to convince both her husband and Jason that the school does owe them something. Specifically, following a heated conversation among Jason, his mother and his father about whether or not to seek financial retribution, Jason and his mother continue to talk after her husband leaves for work. By the end of the conversation, Jason is willing to agree with his mother that “maybe somebody should have taught me to tackle,” thus consenting to her decision to pursue legal options.

The series depicts Mitchell Street, the father, employ at various points in time a different set of resources to cope with the disability-related situation than those of his wife. Specifically, he uses less verbal communication than Joanne Street does in his interactions about and with their son. An example of such communication is when Mitchell asks no questions and makes no comments when the doctor is explaining Jason’s medical condition after his spinal surgery. Instead, he uses eye contact and body language to communicate his concern and support for his son when Jason asks the doctor if he will be able to walk again. Mitchell as a father resorts to non-verbal modes of communication when he gives Jason a fist pound to communicate that he is on his side after Jason reassures his mother that he is going to be fine on his own while they are at work.

Jason’s father is shown to draw from the executive functioning resource when the family discusses college plans for Jason in the cafeteria scene. During that scene, the mother argues that it is too soon for Jason to return to high school and make college plans while Mitchell Street openly challenges his wife in front of their son: “The sooner he can get back to the normal routine, the better.”

Mitchell Street is also resourceful in that he is able to increase Jason’s accessibility by converting his home office to Jason’s new bed-

room and building a ramp leading up to the front door. He, like Jason, is conflicted between his loyalty to the team and Coach Taylor in particular and Jason’s long-term financial needs. He wants to be seen by his wife as a provider, but he also wants to stay in good graces with the larger community because he knows his business depends on it.

## Discussion and implications

### - *Child-Parent Interaction and Agency Forms in the Series*

The purpose of this study was to analyze interactions between a teenager, Jason Street, who acquires a disability and his parents, in the television series *Friday Night Lights*, using the bilateral model of parent-child relations (Kuczynski & Hildebrandt, 1997; Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2009). Overall, the themes that we have presented here reflect many aspects of the bilateral model and social relational theory in general. In the series, we see the interaction patterns and socialization processes depicted between the parents and Jason as representative of a bilateral relationship and power dynamics.

Specifically, we observe both the Street parents and their son Jason involved in various social processes and decision making at the onset of Jason’s injury and after the surgery, when they discover that Jason will not be able to walk again, and again when they are left with the difficult question of how to proceed further. In their responses, both the parents and the child are shown to act as agents in a discussion and decision-making process on the way to solution. Both the son and the parents are shown to draw from a range of resources, including individual, relational and cultural resources to negotiate their individual positions and to influence the other.

Not all theoretical categories from the social relational theory are represented in our data and not all theoretical elements have the same precedence in our findings. For instance, we found that the majority of the resources both the parents and Jason use to exercise their

agency fall in the individual and relational resource categories, with cultural resources being utilized the least.

We are privy to almost no accounts of the socialization and enculturation processes between Jason and his parents when Jason was a child, the time period in his life when influencing and relationships forming were most likely the strongest.

Analogously, although we know that both Jason and his parents have been enculturated into football, the relationship between him and his parents is not one of enculturation *per se*. Because they love him presumably for reasons other than football, after his injury, they are compelled to see him in a different light despite the enculturation into football. In other words, his parents' love for him must find a different footing. Post-injury, they can no longer admire him because he is such a successful football player. His athleticism no longer is, nor can it be a reason for their devotion.

Since the series treatment concerning these topics was limited, it made certain aspects of enculturation and socialization described in the bilateral model of parent-child relations (Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2009) less applicable to some of the data we analyzed and therefore less evident in our analysis and discussion of the findings. Nevertheless, enculturation, socialization and other elements of the bilateral model of parent-child relations were connected to other topics that we discovered in our data and we discuss these theory manifestations in our findings.

#### - Assumptions about the Parent-Child with Disability Relations Today

##### Gender Role Stereotypes

The representation of the mother's and father's reactions to Jason Street's injury (trauma) is gendered and somewhat stereotypical, with his mother being portrayed as being more externally emotional than his father is. It may also be evidence of gendered ways of dealing with issues when Jason's father leaves the room

and lets his mother deal with Jason's response to the newspaper news about the lawsuit. There is evidence also of gendered ways of disciplining the child.

Within the parenting style literature, research supports the presence of differing reactions and expressiveness to disability among mothers and fathers as they attempt to adapt to the disability (Hornby, 1992a; Hornby, 1992b; Little, 2002). In *Friday Night Lights*, the mother and father openly and directly differ in the extent to which they express their emotions. These gendered differences are supported by research, to wit: "In comparison with fathers, mothers reported being significantly more expressive" (Halberstadt et al., 1995, p. 100) and "Other research [Boyd & Beail, 1994; Krugman, 1996] suggests that these types of differences may be due to men valuing other types of coping experiences for themselves and socio-cultural biases that discourage men from acknowledging their emotional pain and seeking help" (Little, 2002, p. 569). Due, then, to cultural biases, men are expected to be cool and keep their emotions under control. Yet it is evident in *Friday Night Lights* series that the father is also experiencing intense reactions to his son's initial diagnosis.

In terms of implications, it may well be that some of the social relational memes about gender roles portrayed in *Friday Night Lights* series have been transmitted to audience members subconsciously. That is, the social relational values that this show purveys about gender and gender roles might have been absorbed in part by the target audience, which research shows is likely. As Lauzen, Dozier, and Horan (2008) note: "When applied to prime-time television programming, this literature suggests that the basic social roles assigned to female and male characters by storytellers are tremendously important contributors to the construction and maintenance of gender stereotypes" (p. 201).

#### - Stereotypical Views of Disability

There is evidence of stereotypical viewing of the person with disability and his/her ability to



support him/herself. Jason's mother is concerned about his future and his ability to support himself. For his part, Jason challenges the stereotypical perceptions of individuals with a disability. He also challenges the game that lawyers play: "You know, is that all I am here? Huh? Just some cripple boy that you can wheel out in front a bunch of people to make some money off me?"

This behavior signifies his refusal to be socially conditioned into a dependency within his own community and is contrary to the stereotypical socialization expectations of children to be dependent on their parents in general (Stolz, 2010) and media portrayals of the individuals with disabilities as being unable to support themselves or have a successful life (Black & Pretes, 2007).

Serious injury such as a permanent disability is however perceived by the Streets as the direct threat of being stigmatized or crippled for life. McRuer (2006) calls this threat "compulsory able-bodiedness" (p. 5). Jason's parents represent the ableist tendencies to view disability/illness as stigmatizing (Stolz, 2010) and thus we have Jason's father pushing him to get back to a normal routine to avoid taking any chances on being stuck with the stigma of being seriously injured (disabled). This position reflects however a lack of acknowledgement on the part of the parents that "the problem of disability" is "in society rather than in the individual" (Stolz, 2010, p. 13).

Thus, the media and sport culture and the community in Dillon, Texas, the setting for this show, define the concepts of normalcy, and those with disabilities fulfill those expectations (Stolz, 2010). Instead of his school making adjustments so that Jason can play with his team even though he uses a wheelchair, he is given a one-night honorary captain's send-off by the audience and broadcast media: Announcer: "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome tonight's honorary captain, number 6, Jason Street." The crowd responds with cheers and chanting and Jason waves back to the crowd and leads the charge through the banner as the team enters the field, representing that,

at least for the recent past, he is still seen as a leader by the team, coach, and community.

Lawyers in the series too are portrayed as using certain strategies that depend on the perceptions of disability – many of them stereotypical – to win the case, such as appealing to people's emotions and engendering a sense of pity for the disabled in the courthouse. In the lawsuit story thread, Jason's lawyer says, "I don't care who pays us. But I want you to have a good look at that boy right there. Because when I put him on the stand in his wheelchair and he tells his story, there is not a jury in Carr County that is not gonna give us three times what it is we're asking for." In this sense, the embeddedness of legal, social and cultural norms regarding disability create skewed advantages for different parties. The parents initially consider and embark upon the lawsuit because the laws and regulations about settlements for football players put them at a disadvantage. They are set up to support the school interests but not those of the parents of football players.

In light of social relational theory (Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007), the Street family's position however demonstrates their ability to marshal the cultural resources available to them as individuals, despite the apparent lack of such provisions from their community. Parents of a child with a disability are encouraged by this example to exercise their right to draw from the cultural resources, whether they are available to them immediately or not. The communities in which parents of children with a disability live in turn should provide the programs that emphasize such agency and that provide the resources to the parents to act upon it.

#### *- Socialization and Enculturation within the Community*

As illustrated above, the community has a strong influence on Jason's family life although the community's response to Jason's situation is inconsistent. They provide a great deal of emotional support for Jason when he is a successful player, but after his injury they are not

as helpful in providing the necessary financial and educational and counseling support for his family to help them take care of Jason and his needs.

Throughout the series, high expectations – even unrealistic ones – are held by the town community for Jason and his team. Mass media, most potently in the form of television and radio coverage of their games, also amplify the stratospheric expectations of a football-saturated community and their emotional requirement that their beloved Panthers football team always come out on top:

Announcer: "The Panthers should win this game, there is no question about it. With all the buildup and the hope of this season, and the talent they have on this team... it is that great offensive backfield for Dillon that has everybody's eye, Jason Street, the quarterback..."

This puts a great deal of pressure on Jason, his teammates, Coach Taylor and vicariously on Jason's parents. At the same time, on more than one occasion Jason explicitly states, "You don't go against the Panthers" indicating his understanding of their significance and influence in the community. Importantly, Jason's statement indicates that he and his family have internalized the ideals, values, and expectations of football players within the cultural milieu that exists within the Dillon fictional town community, an action that represents the process of enculturation into that community (Kuczynski, Navara, & Boiger, 2011).

Unfortunately, the long term support that Jason needs from his community is not present, as Jason points out that pancake dinners and town fundraisers will only last for so long and that he and his family need to think long-term.

Neither did we come across any mention of counseling support for Mitchell and Joanne Street as parents of a young man with a disability. These might well have been cultural resources to which they were entitled, legally speaking. As noted earlier, the Dillon community appeared to have failed to provide these

means to the Street family. This is ironic, given the fact that Coach Taylor's wife is a guidance counselor at the high school and that we see the school provide counseling support for football players in terms of their academics and social needs.

Jason's parents, like any parent who learns about their child's disability, are fearful, and they need to go through the process of grieving a loss of their dream child and eventually making new dreams in order to successfully cope with a disability (Taub, 2006). "[F]ear of the future is a common emotion: "What is going to happen to this child when he is five years old, when he is twelve, when he is twenty-one?" (McGill Smith, 2003, p. 2). Therefore, they need counseling for Jason and for themselves from Jason's school. According to the literature, "Professional school counselors are often the designated (and sometimes lone) advocates for children with special needs and their parents in an intricate and often intimidating educational bureaucracy" (Erford, House, & Martin, 2003, p. 18).

Lack of professional counseling support and the fear of the future do not, however, immobilize Jason's parents. On the contrary, they deal with the adjustments to a disability one day at a time. They remodel the house to welcome and accommodate Jason when he returns home from the rehabilitation center. They seek legal counsel to advocate for Jason and his financial needs. While these actions are indicators of healthy family functioning in times of a crisis (Lightsey & Sweeney, 2008; Olson, 2011) and family adjustment and or adaptation to a disability (Butera-Prinzi, Charles, & Story, 2014), the resources from which they draw to exercise such agency are the individual and relational resources that had either resided in them or that they were able to garner through their personal efforts, mutual responsiveness and shared supportive affect within their relationships (Killen & Smetana, 2014). They are not cultural resources (Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007) that arguably should have been conveyed to them by their community. Hence the "takeaway" or message to communities at large and their respective governing



bodies might be that they should make appropriate legal and counseling support provisions for their citizens who have children with disabilities and that they should motivate their community members to make such programs and initiatives available to the members who need them the most, the families of children with disabilities.

## Conclusion

By depicting both sides (the good and the bad) of the lived experience associated with a teen athlete acquiring a disability, and by deconstructing the intricate network of influences from the community and the diverse power and relational dynamics between Jason Street and his parents, *Friday Night Lights* presents a more than typically realistic social representation of adolescent disability and of child/parent relations in our current cultural zeitgeist.

As parents who are on the cusp of having to let go of their daily authority and oversight of Jason, Joanne and Mitchell Street are seen as struggling mightily with a future for their son that is shadowed in doubt. Jason is not pictured as a supercrip, and his parents are not presented as superheroic. As portrayed, these depictions form a counternarrative to the stereotypical representations of disability in the popular culture and media (Black & Pretes, 2007; Crow, 2014). However, the Streets are also depicted as conservative middle-class Americans of good character who view disability as an end to all good things – especially football – rather than as a challenge to acquire a different, but happy and productive life for their son.

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