

# Highly Probable Psychological Disorders of the Character Joon from the Film *Benny and Joon* Directed by Jeremiah Chechik in 1993

Jaehee Choi

**Abstract**—The author closely observed the mentally ill character Joon from the film “Benny & Joon” directed by Jeremiah Chechik in 1993 and classified the numerous varying symptoms into four major categories: schizophrenia, OCD, Asperger disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. Although the film captures varying mental illnesses in quite a blithe way, the author reveals the genuine gravity of the cause and the severe symptoms of those illnesses. A small gesture or a few words can be a significant clue to a serious mental disease. Throughout the paper, the author enumerates big and small details from the film and analyzes them.

**Index Terms**—Psychological disorders, Benny & Joon, film, character.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Juniper Pearl (Mary Stuart Masterson) is one of the main characters of the film *Benny & Joon* directed by Jeremiah Chechik in 1993. She is a fascinating character that suffers from indeterminable mental illness.

The director does not provide any specific name of the illness Joon suffers from. He intentionally gave the character varying symptoms in order not to offend any particular group of the mentally ill. In this paper, the author would like to closely examine those divergent symptoms and classify them into possible psychological disorders.

## II. PLOT

Benjamin Pearl (Aidan Quinn), a hardworking man, works at a car repair center and looks after his mentally ill sister, Juniper Pearl (Mary Stuart Masterson). After several replacements of previous housekeepers, a memorial hospital suggests Benny to send his sister to a group home. Yet, Benny insists to stay together with his only family. One night, Joon joins her brother’s friends and plays a poker game during his absence. Mike (Joe Grifasi), one of Benny’s friends, wins the bet and manages to give away his annoying cousin off his hand. Benny reluctantly brings Mike’s cousin, Sam (Johnny Debb), home and notices Sam’s extraordinary gift. At first, Benny eagerly wants to help Sam start his future career with the special talent. Yet, when Joon and Sam revealed their relationship as lovers, Benny rages and kicks Sam out. Consequently, Joon and Sam run away together, but during the elopement, Joon throws an outburst on a bus and is

carried away to the hospital. Joon refuses to meet anyone, but Benny and Sam sneak into the hospital and convince her to come out and try living in her own apartment. Their effort cordially touches Joon’s heart and succeeds to bring Joon back into their lives.

## III. SCHIZOPHRENIA

Schizophrenia literally means “split mind.” It is a mental disease in which a person’s mind is separated into pieces. Schizophrenic patients display one or more of these three distinct symptoms. First, they have incoherent thoughts that involve irrationality, fragmented and eccentric thoughts, and delicacy of their own private world. Second, most of them possess linguistic problems and distorted perception systems that are usually followed by illusions. Lastly, split minded people commonly show inappropriate emotions and behaviors.

Joon hardly manages to explain to Benny why Sam was not home. She just repeats the same phrases and cannot describe what exactly happened: 00:36:40. “He was in the air and...and...and...with a thing and... it was really loud. It was really loud.” Her speech becomes surprisingly incoherent given that she usually speaks with above-average eloquence. Incoherence is one of the major schizophrenic symptoms. Also, while eating her favorite food tapioca, Joon tells Sam that she does not like raisins: 00:43:40. The reasons that she gives to dislike for raisins are irrational and even delusional. Saying that raisins are just humiliated grapes that had their lives stolen, Joon again displays the first symptom of schizophrenia, delusional irrationality.

In the beginning of the film, Benny tells Sam that Joon sometimes hears voices in her head: 00:32:05. Illusion is also a symptom that represents schizophrenia. In Joon’s case, such symptom visits her mainly as a form of auditory hallucinations. She directly displays this particular symptom while she elopes with her lover, Sam, on a bus: 01:18:00. She talks to herself in an agitated manner and at the end she starts sobbing and ranting that even stopped the vehicle and made other passengers leave the bus. She says such words to herself that imply her hearing voices: “No, no. I’m not.” “It’s not all in my head.” Joon’s paintings also suggest possibility that Joon from time to time suffers from visual hallucinations as well.

Such trait as illusions sometimes develops specifically into persecutory delusions. Such development and irrationality mentioned above as the first trait of schizophrenia are both clearly displayed during the table tennis game between

Benny and Joon: 00:17: 11. Although the ball she hit evidently flew over the table without touching it, she strongly claims that the ball caught the corner and that Benny is trying to cheat her. She even cries out, “You’re all trying to cheat me!” and breaks a lamp with her racket. She apparently cannot hold her rage and also suffers from persecutory delusions.

Not only illusions Joon suffers from, but also eccentric linguistic traits she possesses. Despite her eloquence, she describes certain things with her own private vocabulary. Her calling housekeepers as “Smail” is one of the examples. Furthermore, while Benny plays poker games with his friends, Joon catches a word Mike said and from that single word, starts elaborating disconnected ideas that seem reasonably pertinent only to her: 00:09:45. Joon distinctly possesses the second trait of schizophrenia, which is distorted perception and linguistic problems.

The third trait schizophrenic patient’s show in common is inappropriate delivery of emotions and behaviors. Joon, for example, wears a snorkel Benny won from a poker game and spends a day. She enjoys funny food that others find disgusting. Also, while wearing the snorkel, she goes out and disturbs heavy traffic with her table tennis racket: 00:13:48. Moreover, Joon displays inappropriate face expressions that do not fit the context at all: 01:15:43. Although Benny’s unceasing care and Sam’s love easily bring out enough emotions from Joon, she shows the third schizophrenic symptoms several times throughout the film.

#### IV. OCD

Ref. [1] Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is an anxiety disorder characterized by intrusive thoughts that produce uneasiness, apprehension, fear, or worry; by repetitive behaviors aimed at reducing the associated anxiety; or by a combination of such obsessions and compulsions.

Symptoms of the disorder include excessive washing or cleaning; repeated checking; extreme hoarding; preoccupation with sexual, violent or religious thoughts; relationship-related obsessions; aversion to particular numbers; and nervous rituals, such as opening and closing a door a certain number of times before entering or leaving a room. These symptoms can be alienating and time-consuming, and often cause severe emotional and financial distress. The acts of those who have OCD may appear paranoid and potentially psychotic. However, OCD sufferers generally recognize their obsessions and compulsions as irrational, and may become further distressed by this realization.

There are several theories about the causes of OCD; compulsions are learned behaviors, which become repetitive and habitual when they are associated with relief from anxiety; OCD is due to genetic and hereditary factors; chemical, structural and functional abnormalities in the brain are the cause; distorted beliefs reinforce and maintain symptoms associated with OCD. It is possible that several factors interact to trigger the development of OCD. The underlying causes may be further influenced by stressful life events, hormonal changes and personality traits.

OCD patients show common obsessions and compulsions.

Obsessions (repetitive thoughts) generally involve concern with dirt, germs or toxins, something terrible happening such as fire, death and illness, and symmetry, order, or exactness. Compulsions (repetitive behaviors) involve excessive hand washing, bathing, tooth brushing, or grooming, repeating rituals such as going in and out of a door and up and down a chair, and checking doors, locks, appliances, car breaks and homework. [2] Compulsions are usually performed to try and prevent an obsessive fear from happening, to reduce the anxiety, or to make things feel ‘just right’. Usually compulsions become like rituals; they follow specific rules and patterns, and involve constant repetitions. Compulsions give an illusory sense of short-term relief to anxiety. However, they actually reinforce anxiety and make the obsessions seem more real, so that the anxiety soon returns.

The first outburst Joon threw was toward her previous housekeeper, Mrs. Smail: 00:05:05. When Benny asked her the reason she gave out such a sudden outburst of anger, she answers that Mrs. Smail was “given to fits of semiprecious metaphors” and that she “moves things.” This is also one of the compulsive symptoms the OCD patients share: applying rigid rules and patterns to the placement of objects, furniture, books, clothes and other items. Throughout the film, the director shows Joon’s high sensitivity to her surroundings and relationships with others. Such sensitive reactions accord with the behaviors of other OCD patients given that obsessions restrict people to be attached to certain details.

#### V. ASPERGER DISORDER

Ref. [3] Asperger syndrome (AS), also known as Asperger disorder (AD), is an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) that is characterized by significant difficulties in social interaction and nonverbal communication, alongside restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior and interests. It differs from other autism spectrum disorders by its relative preservation of linguistic and cognitive development. Although not required for diagnosis, physical clumsiness and atypical (peculiar, odd) use of language are frequently reported.

Ref. [4] Asperger syndrome (AS) is one of the autism spectrum disorders (ASD) or pervasive developmental disorders (PDD), which are a spectrum of psychological conditions that are characterized by abnormalities of social interaction and communication that pervade the individual's functioning, and by restricted and repetitive interests and behavior. Like other psychological development disorders, ASD begins in infancy or childhood, has a steady course without remission or relapse, and has impairments that result from maturation-related changes in various systems of the brain. [5] ASD, in turn, is a subset of the broader autism phenotype, which describes individuals who may not have ASD but do have autistic-like traits, such as social deficits. [6] Of the other four ASD forms, autism is the most similar to AS in signs and likely causes, but its diagnosis requires impaired communication and allows delay in cognitive development; Rett syndrome and childhood disintegrative disorder share several signs with autism but may have unrelated causes; and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) is diagnosed when the criteria for a more specific disorder are unmet.

Ref. [7] as a pervasive developmental disorder, Asperger syndrome is distinguished by a pattern of symptoms rather than a single symptom. It is characterized by qualitative impairment in social interaction, by stereotyped and restricted patterns of behavior, activities and interests, and by no clinically significant delay in cognitive development or general delay in language. [8] Intense preoccupation with a narrow subject, one-sided verbosity, restricted prosody, and physical clumsiness are typical of the condition, but are not required for diagnosis.

When Benny explains Joon's conditions to Sam, he warns Sam to "let her go about her routine:" 00:31:40. [7] People with Asperger syndrome often display behavior, interests, and activities that are restricted and repetitive and are sometimes abnormally intense or focused. They may stick to inflexible routines, move in stereotyped and repetitive ways, or preoccupy themselves with parts of objects. Asperger disorder would be a reasonable explanation for Joon's need for rigid structure.

Also, some of the linguistic traits such as her use of the word "Smail" suggested above and the apparent difficulty that lies in every relationship Joon has imply that she may also have Asperger disorder. [8] Although individuals with Asperger syndrome acquire language skills without significant general delay and their speech typically lacks significant abnormalities, language acquisition and use is often atypical. [9] Abnormalities include verbosity, abrupt transitions, literal interpretations and miscomprehension of nuance, use of metaphor meaningful to only the speaker, auditory perception deficits, unusually pedantic, formal or idiosyncratic speech, and oddities in loudness, pitch, intonation, prosody, and rhythm. In Joon's case, the symptom involves the use of metaphor (Smail) meaningful only to the speaker.

## VI. POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Ref. [10] Posttraumatic stress disorder is classified as an anxiety disorder; the characteristic symptoms are not present before exposure to the violently traumatic event. Typically the individual with PTSD persistently avoids all thoughts, emotions and discussion of the stressor event and may experience amnesia for it. However, the event is commonly relived by the individual through intrusive, recurrent recollections, flashbacks and nightmares.

References [11], [12] PTSD is believed to be caused by the experience of a wide range of traumatic events and, particularly if the trauma is extreme, can occur in persons with no predisposing conditions. [13] Individuals frequently experience "survivor's guilt" for remaining alive while others died. Causes of the symptoms of PTSD are the experiencing or witnessing of a stressor event involving death, serious injury or such threat to the self or others in a situation in which the individual felt intense fear, horror, or powerlessness.

Ref. [14] The diagnostic criteria for PTSD, stipulated in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10 (ICD-10), may be summarized as: exposure to a stressful event or situation (either short or long lasting) of exceptionally threatening or catastrophic nature,

which is likely to cause pervasive distress in almost anyone; persistent remembering or "reliving" the stressor by intrusive flash backs, vivid memories, recurring dreams, or by experiencing distress when exposed to circumstances resembling or associated with the stressor; actual or preferred avoidance of circumstances resembling or associated with the stressor (not present before exposure to the stressor); either (1) or (2): inability to recall, either partially or completely, some important aspects of the period of exposure to the stressor/persistent symptoms of increased psychological sensitivity and arousal (not present before exposure to the stressor) shown by any two of the following: difficulty in falling or staying asleep; irritability or outbursts of anger; difficulty in concentrating; hyper-vigilance; exaggerated startle response.

Benny and Joon's parents died in a car accident and two children were at the sight when such terrible accident happened: 00:41:10. Given that Joon wears a helmet while riding a car, viewers can infer that she has not fully overcome from having witnessed the death of her parents.

Joon may have such mental disorders by nature. Yet, most mental illnesses are acquired later in life. There is a high possibility that her other conditions were accompanied by post-traumatic stress disorder after she had witnessed the loss of her parents.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Reviewers Mick Martin, Marsha Porter point out "[Although] most viewers will enjoy this bittersweet comedy. Folks coping with mental illness in real life will be offended by yet another film in which the problem is sanitized and trivialized." In fact, the film *Benny & Joon* is a little unrealistic and lighthearted. Its main focus is on the changes Sam gives to Benny and Joon's life. Yet, however light mental diseases Joon seems to have, the author wanted to cast light upon the daily lives of the mentally ill and why they show such incomprehensible behaviors.

Although not specified during the film, Joon's mental illness can be inferred as schizophrenia, OCD, Asperger disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, all of which can be assumed to have occurred after her parent's death.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Wikimedia Foundation, "Obsessive-compulsive disorder," *Wikipedia*, 16 Sept. 2013.
- [2] Better Health Channel, "Obsessive compulsive disorder," N.p., n.d. 20 Sept. 2013.
- [3] Wikimedia Foundation, "Asperger syndrome," *Wikipedia*, 08 Sept. 2013.
- [4] World Health Organization, "F84 Pervasive developmental disorders," *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (10th (ICD-10) ed.), 2006.
- [5] J. Piven, P. Palmer, D. Jacobi, D. Childress, and S. Arndt, "Broader autism phenotype: Evidence from a family history study of multiple-incidence autism families," *Am J Psychiatry*, vol. 154, no. 2, pp. 185-90, 1997.
- [6] C. Lord, E. H. Cook, B. L. Leventhal, and D. G. Amaral, "Autism spectrum disorders," *Neuron*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 355-63, 2000.
- [7] American Psychiatric Association, "Diagnostic criteria for 299.80 Asperger's disorder (AD)," *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, (4th, text revision (DSM-IV-TR) ed.), 2000.
- [8] A. Klin, "Autism and Asperger syndrome: an overview," *Rev Bras Psiquiatr*, vol. 28, suppl 1: S3-S11, 2006.
- [9] J. McPartland and A. Klin, "Asperger's syndrome," *Adolesc Med Clin*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 771-788, 2006.

- [10] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV*, Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994.
- [11] *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*, National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- [12] Mayo Clinic staff, "Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)," Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research.
- [13] C. S. Fullerton and U. Wang, "Acute stress disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and depression in disaster or rescue workers," *Am J Psychiatry*, vol. 161, no. 8, pp. 1370-1376, 2004.
- [14] *The ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders*, World Health Organization, pp. 120–121.



**Jaehee Choi** was born in Ilsandong-gu, Goyang-si, Gyunggi-do, Republic of Korea. She is currently in attendance at Hankuk Academy of Foreign Studies located in Yongin-si, Gyunggi-do, Republic of Korea. She is a student who interested in films and psychology.