Thinking in Pictures Summary

Temple Grandin’s *Thinking in Pictures* seamlessly combines aspects from an autobiography, medical journal, and a diary into a compelling must read piece of literature. This book keeps the reader quickly turning the pages as if they were reading a murder mystery, while still learning a great wealth of information about autism and the lives of people with autism.

The primary focus of Grandin’s book is how autism has affected her life as she has grown from a child into a highly successful professional in the agriculture field. She frequently discusses how her thought processes ranging from deduction and memory involve highly detailed 3-D images. *Thinking in Pictures* also contains a very thorough review of current research regarding many aspects of autism including the physiology involved and possible treatment methods. This book was a great read, and it is highly recommended that any one with autism, an autistic child, or a general interest in autism or disabilities should read this book.

Thinking in Pictures Book Review

*Thinking in Pictures* serves as a great bridge between course material and the real world experience of working with people with disabilities. Frequently throughout the book, Grandin discusses topics and concepts from her personal experience that mirror those lessons found in the topics that were covered in this course thus far. Specifically, *Thinking in Pictures* explains in great detail the concepts of autism, how her disability affects her ability for relationships with family and friends, and how autism has affected her experiences in the educational and professional aspects of her life.
Throughout the entire work, Temple Grandin does a fantastic job describing autism, symptoms, effects, assessments, and possible treatments. As first person accounts, her insights frequently go beyond those found in the text book. In the opening paragraph she explains how autism works to the layman by stating, “Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head” (Grandin, 2006, p. 19). Autism is defined by Grandin and in the textbook in very similar ways. Grandin’s definition is more of an explanation of how it affects the person, whereas the text describes autism as a neurological disorder that affects development of communication and social skills (Grandin, 2006; Rosenberg et al., 2008). Recent studies show that autism affects anywhere between 2 in 10,000 to 3.4 in 1,000 children, where cases with boys are three to four times more likely than girls. These studies also show that autism is caused by a suite of factors including genetics, exposure to toxic agents, and timing of exposure of toxic agents (Grandin, 2006; Rosenberg et al., 2008). Grandin explains in great detail that people with autism can be high functioning or low functioning, while others have similar disabilities like pervasive development disorder (PDD), disintegrative disorder, Rett’s disorder, Asperger’s syndrome, and Kanner’s syndrome (Grandin, 2006; Rosenberg et al., 2008). This wide spectrum frequently leads to difficulties with diagnosis, treatment, and schooling (Grandin, 2006; Hehir, 2002).

Autism is typically characterized by a myriad of symptoms and tell-tale characteristics. The first symptoms being at early childhood (12-24 months old) where a child may exhibit an extreme sensitivity to touch and/or frequent tantrums. As the child grows older they may show “(a lack of) speech, poor eye contact, tantrums, appearance of deafness, no interest in people, and constant staring off into space” (Grandin, 2006; p. 33). Tantrums are
frequently caused by frustration from being unable to communicate, sensitivity to touch, or the presence of loud and sudden noises. Other common characteristics include rocking or other rhythmic motions, improper playing with toys, lack of social contact, and obsession with toys with simple and repetitive motions like a pin-wheel (Grandin, 2006; Rosenberg et al., 2008).

Currently, there are many screening and diagnostic tests for autism including Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (CHAT), Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS), and the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS) (Rosenberg et al., 2008). The most accepted and comprehensive criteria for diagnosing autism the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual which was published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). These criteria are frequently changing as research progresses, which results in revisions and republication of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. After the recent increase in autism diagnoses, the APA refined the criteria to a point in which 59% of children displaying autistic traits would be diagnosed with autism, where as previous revisions would have diagnosed 91% of those children with autism (Grandin, 2006). Even with these ever changing criteria for diagnosing autism, it is still quite difficult to diagnose autism due to the lack of a specific cause and wide spectrum of cases.

There is no cure-all treatment for autism or any of the associated syndromes. Treatment of autism and autistic characteristics is frequently difficult, and typically requires an individualistic approach. Medications are used in a suite of drugs, and each one is prescribed typically to take care of one characteristic of the disability. For example, Felbatol is given for epileptic symptoms, Prozac to stop self-abuse, and antidepressant drugs like Anafranil tend to decrease severity of autistic symptoms as a whole. Grandin cautions that medication isn’t always needed, and in some cases of autism may be helped by simple diet changes like removing gluten and casein. This diet is often very strict and involves meat, fruits, vegetables, and starches.
like rice and potatoes. Overall, each child’s case is different, and Grandin advises parents to not over medicate, try nutritional approaches, work closely with doctors, and use logic when trying new drugs and holistic approaches (Grandin, 2006).

Just like two persons with autism’s medication may not be the same, how two persons with autism deal with social relationships will also be different and most likely pose steep challenges for them. Grandin’s work showcases how difficult social relationships can be for a person diagnosed with autism. The idea of fearing, dreading, or misunderstanding social relationships remains a hard concept for persons without Autism to grasp. However, as Grandin shows, the more complex human emotions in a relationship, the more difficult the challenge became for her to successfully navigate the social relationship. This discussion of Grandin’s reactions and thoughts in social relationships become more interesting when the relationship revolves around her concept and thoughts surrounding love, emotion, and the relationship with people close to her.

Grandin repeatedly indicates how her feelings and emotions remain different from that of others. Her ideas of love and emotion severely contrasted with how a person without autism might think of a loved one. Grandin first relates how her emotions resemble a child, and that she does not know what the complex emotion of a human relationship is (Grandin, 89 & 91). We are introduced to these ideas in her discussion of her relationships with her sister and her mother. Grandin basically tells how she cannot navigate these complex human relationships that well, and that it, “has caused friction between me and some family members when I have failed to read subtle emotional clues (Grandin, 92). The first one involving her sister involves not understanding how another person thinks of you. Grandin specifically relates how her sister told her later in life that she felt like she always had to tiptoe around her (Grandin, 92). Grandin
plainly relates that she had no idea her younger sister felt this way all through childhood. Furthermore, the friction and difficulties in relationships really show in Grandin’s discussion of her mother’s feelings. Grandin writes how her mother, motivated by love, worked so hard to put Temple in the right, less stressful situations which is key for persons with autism (Grandin 91). However, because of Temple’s troubles with emotion and showing emotions in return, her mother felt that Temple did not love her (Grandin, 91-92).

Our lecture notes and text fail to illustrate or mention how deep and dark the emotional challenges and relationship difficulties can be for persons with autism, even for someone with high functioning autism such as Temple Grandin. Our lecture notes speak of how, “‘Autism’ under IDEA is defined as a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age 3, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance (Billingsley, 3).” The discussion of the problems with diagnosis and confusion of terms combined with Grandin’s discussion about her sister and mother shows how enigmatic autism is and continues to be for not just educators but for parents and loved ones. What one takes for granted in a relationship now becomes the most difficult and longest of journeys, and this connection between autism and social relationships really contains importance for future educators who have the bridge the a certain gap in the social arena between persons with autism and others in the classroom. In addition, Grandin’s case represents a highly functioning person with Autism. Educators confront all types and varieties of cases, and the difference between one child with autism and another in all likelihood will be quite vast.

Grandin’s work while showing the difficulties in social and emotional relationships does show how less emotional and less complex relationships can be easier for the writer. Interestingly enough for Temple Grandin, the more straightforward relationships like the ones
Grandin conducts in her job with clients and Meat Industry managers make up these easier relationships. This contrasts the challenges other persons with disabilities meet in the professional arena and the work place. In the professional world, Grandin excels at a high rate. She navigates her professional world with much more ease and confidence due to her style of thinking and her love for what she does.

Early on in this work, we see how much Grandin loves cattle and animals in general. Her work designing cattle chutes, cleaning vats, and slaughter pens never strays far from a love of animals. Her designs try to seize the natural behavior patterns while seeking to decrease stress on the cattle in an effort to provide for a smoother, calmer, and in the end a more efficient operation for the client (Grandin, 167). This attitude plus her uncanny and highly valuable ability to use her visual thinking not only enables her to view the details of a project but also put herself at the sightline of the animals themselves. What do they see and what stresses them are the key questions that concern Grandin in her work? This question holds the key to understanding persons with autism as well. Grandin’s visual thinking and overall different thought process makes her very good at what she does. Her book tells how she has designed over one third of all the livestock handling facilities in the country. This would indicate a high success rate in the professional world.

However no journey comes without difficulties, and Grandin mentions some interesting frictions in her relationships in the working world as well. Grandin, in her chapter *The Ways of the World*, relates how she always benefited the most from unconventional people. She profited greatly from educators like Mr. Carlock that defended Grandin’s ideas while finding outlets and symbols for her to concentrate on and get interested in. Carlock defended Grandin’s ideas about a squeeze machine which allayed fears and released tensions in a person with Autism’s body, as
well as centering and boosting Grandin’s interest in science. However, cattle barons and handlers may not be that unconventional. Grandin quickly points out how her unconventional mind plus a bluntness to correct problems or difficulties could quickly place her job in jeopardy. Grandin tells a story how she offended the President of Swift when she wrote him a letter about correcting problems in a plant (Grandin, 113-114). Another such story showcases how Grandin’s talents were recognized but that she did not dress appropriately or in another instance she criticized weldings without being tactful about it (Grandin, 113-114). Bluntness and technically being right did not guarantee being socially right (Grandin, 113). In Grandin’s case, her ability to adapt and learn plus her extremely high level of talents led her to overcome relationships in the professional world and excel at what she loved.

In conclusion, Temple Grandin’s work *Thinking In Pictures* constitutes an excellent view into the life of a person with autism. The work showcases how a person with autism thinks, adapts, and sees the world around them. People are bluntly introduced to this condition and how a person deals with it. We see how a person with autism excels in the professional world as well as the ever challenging personal world. Grandin does an excellent job of bringing all the different aspects of autism to bear in one book, so that others may try to understand.
Works Cited


