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Valuing Autistic Adolescents as Epistemic Agents and Experts of their Own Lives

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctorate in Educational Psychology

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Abstract

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Autistic individuals, in particular autistic adolescents are often seldom-heard and in turn can be denied personhood, across a range of social environments, including education and research. The field of autism research has often failed to attend to the views and voices of those with embodied experience, those who have specialist expertise, the voice of autistic people themselves. As such, autistic adolescents experience epistemic injustice, in which their capacity as a knower or epistemic agent who creates, uses, or conveys knowledge, including their lived experience, is rejected. This thesis seeks to amplify the voices of autistic adolescents by exploring their views and experiences in relation to pertinent aspects of identity. The systematic literature review in Chapter 2, explores how autistic adolescents conceptualise autism, whilst Chapter 3, an empirical paper, examines the effects of gender stereotypes on adolescents who identify as autistic and gender diverse. In turn, this thesis aims to re-examine narratives surrounding autism, ensuring that they are formed by those for whom they are concerned, those with lived experience and therefore value autistic adolescents as epistemic agents and experts of their own lives.

Keywords: autism, adolescents, stereotypes, identity, epistemic agents

Language Statement

Whilst there is no universally accepted way to talk about autism (Keating et al., 2023) the following thesis uses identity-first language, e.g., *autistic adolescents,* this language is typically favoured by autistic communities and self-advocates and has been adopted by health care professionals and researchers (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2016). I however acknowledge the variation and complexity of language preferences among individuals (Bury et al., 2023).

There are multiple shifting terms associated with gender identity, with terminology and language preference varying considerably between individuals and groups (Gender Identity Research & Education Society, n.d.). The terms 'gender diverse' and 'gender diversity' were adopted in the empirical study, including research materials shared with participants. Gender diversity refers to a person's gender identity, role, or expression which differs from the cultural norms prescribed for people of a particular sex, that is different from a unitary cisgender[1] experience (Strang et al., 2018). In the context of the empirical study, gender diverse is used to describe individuals who are not cisgender and thus do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. As such, gender diverse is an umbrella term to describe people without reference to a particular cultural norm, in a manner that can be more affirming and potentially less stigmatising than other terms such as gender nonconformity (APA, 2015).

Adolescence refers to a phase of life between childhood and adulthood. The conceptualisation and definition of adolescence, however, varies across history, context, countries, culture, literature and policy. As such, adolescence is typically characterised by biological maturation and notable social role transitions. Such markers however have changed over the past century. Whilst 10 -19 years old was typically used to define adolescence in the 20th century, we are starting to see this age range shift up to the age of 24, in line with contemporary understandings of

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[1] Cisgender or Cis "Someone whose gender is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a cis(gender) woman is someone who was assigned female at birth and continues to live and identify as a woman." (Stonewall, 2025).

maturation and shifting role transitions found in society (Sawyer et al., 2018). For the following systematic review, a conservative age range of 10-19 years was adopted. For the empirical study, an age range of 11-17 years was initially adopted to reflect secondary school age in the UK. This age range was then adjusted to include participants aged 18-25 years, on account of recruitment via the online platform Prolific.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Carys Deeley

Title of thesis: Stereotypes and Identity; Valuing Autistic Adolescents as Epistemic Agents and Experts of their Own Lives

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Acknowledgements

Whilst the following thesis has, of course, as per the Declaration of Authorship statement, been my own novel making, it is inevitably the creation of many and would not have been possible without the collective guidance, support and encouragement of those around me.

Firstly, I am incredibly grateful to those who generously shared their time and their experiences with me as part of the empirical aspect of this thesis. Their openness and candidness was admirable and inspiring; I hope that I have been able to share their voices and ensure they contribute to improving the lives of others.

I, of course, wish to extend my gratitude to my very patient supervisors, Beckett and Henry, who have offered invaluable guidance, knowledge and kindness throughout this entire roller coaster of a journey with some interesting lows and also some comical highs. To Tim, my personal tutor, thank you for your care, compassion and encouragement over these somewhat eventful three years and for humouring me, often pulling your leg to diffuse situations I found uncomfortable. To the wider Doctoral Team, thank you for sharing your passions, knowledge and time throughout the duration of the course and for fielding my often far from succinct questions. And to my fellow Trainee Educational Psychologists, each and every one of you has provided support, insights and questionable memes that have collectively supported us all through this unique journey.

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To my parents, as ever from day dot, offering support and yet very aware I shall approach things in my own way! Speaking of doing things in their own way and fierce independence, this thesis, colourful language and all, is dedicated to you, Nanna. You were a remarkable, caring, generous and proud Welsh woman, who I am eternally indebted to. As you once lovingly shared, “It’s not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog”. You demonstrated that love (and sheer dogged determination) enables one to “find [their] legs”, put one foot in front of the

other, taking “big steps” (and stairs!) in all aspects of life. You did this whilst never forgetting to mind those less fortunate (woodlice included) and support others even when you yourself were in the depths of adversity. You continue to guide me each and every day, “yn fy nghalon am byth”.

Valuing Autistic Adolescents as Epistemic Agents and Experts of their Own Lives

Chapter 1 Introduction

Aims and Rationale of the Thesis

The primary aim of my thesis was to amplify the voices of autistic adolescents by exploring their views and experiences, thereby providing a platform for seldom-heard communities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) frames the consideration of children's views as a rights-based issue, stating that children's views should be listened to and afforded appropriate weight. The Department for Education and the Department of Health emphasise the importance of gaining children's and young people's views on matters that affect them (2015).

However, as a marginalised group in society, autistic individuals, especially children and adolescents, can be denied personhood. Historically, autism research has often failed to attend to the views and voices of those with embodied experience, those who have specialist expertise, the voice of autistic people themselves, bringing into question the epistemological integrity of such studies (Chown et al., 2017; Milton, 2012; 2014; Woods et al., 2018). Epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2017), in which an individual's capacity as a knower or epistemic agent who creates, uses, or conveys knowledge, including their lived experience, is dismissed, affects autistic individuals (Catala et al., 2021). This aligns with Muted Group Theory, which examines how individuals are silenced and thus excluded by dominant majority groups through the power associated with decision-making and thus the maintenance of dominant discourses, with minoritised groups denied said opportunity and the extent to which marginalised groups are permitted to speak for themselves (Ardener, 2005; Barkman, 2018). Disability advocate, Charlton (1998), called for the voices in policies and decisions from those whom they affect, encapsulated by the phrase 'Nothing About Us Without Us'.

A recent report by Embracing Complexity (2024), a coalition organisation seeking to facilitate evidence-based inclusion of neurodivergent people, identified ten key research priorities which were most important to neurodivergent people, their families and professionals supporting them. Priorities 1-3 pertain to addressing and overcoming stigma experienced, intersectionality, identity, and advocacy. These three themes resonate with the themes explored throughout my thesis in

Chapter 2, a systematic review, exploring how autistic adolescents conceptualise autism and Chapter 3, an empirical paper examining the effects of gender stereotypes on adolescents who identify as autistic and gender diverse.

Since first discussed, the conceptualisation, operationalisation and indeed recognition of autism have evolved drastically over the last century within research and practice (Happé & Frith, 2020). However, as Kourti (2021) highlights, despite advancements, many of the “traditional” theories surrounding autism, such as weak theory of mind (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985); challenge in central coherence (Happé & Frith, 2006) and extreme male brain (Baron-Cohen, 2002) have been proposed on the basis of observed behaviour and hence are phenomenal in nature. Consequently, such theories are arguably surface-level understandings of autism, based on observable behaviours. Autistic individuals can provide insights into both embodied experience and information from interactions with other autistic people, which Kourti (2021) concludes is more credible than accounts from individuals who are non-autistic. As such, the participation of autistic individuals in autism research is crucial.

In my systematic literature review, I examined the following research question: How do adolescents, who identify as autistic, conceptualise autism? Following a systematic search, I drew upon data from 19 papers (18 qualitative and one mixed methods), which represented the voices of 220 autistic adolescents, and carried out a three-stage thematic synthesis. This enabled me to examine how findings can inform a range of professionals, in Education, Health and Care settings and counter societal stigma.

Despite significant advancements, reports have highlighted the extreme paucity of knowledge around relevant, important societal issues for the autistic community (Pellicano et al., 2014). Indeed, Mallipeddi and VanDaalen (2022) call for researchers to explore how intersectionality and social influences affect autistic individuals, with particular focus on exploring racial, gender and sexuality minority group experiences. Intersectionality is inevitably, a complex and dynamic concept that highlights an important dimension of social complexity which examines the interconnectedness and interaction of various social structures and the varying forms of power, privilege, oppression and discrimination, associated with these, within specific cultural contexts (Cohen et al., 2022; Weldon, 2008). Amongst others, such social structures and identities relate to race, class and gender. Initially conceptualised by Crenshaw (1989), in efforts of Black feminists in the United States, intersectionality is thus the notion that subjectivity is created by reciprocal contributing factors of identity (Nash, 2008) and therefore draws focus to the 'multidimensionality' nature that marginalised individuals experience (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139).

Emerging data suggests increased rates of gender diversity in autistic children, in comparison to non-autistic children, based on both self- and parent-report (Corbett et al., 2023). Indeed, Bragg and colleagues' (2018) research with young people indicates that gender is an ever-evolving societal construct, with young people challenging the status quo and driving reconceptualisations that seek to empower (see also Wilson et al., 2023). Yet, Strang and colleagues' (2018) study revealed that many of the 22 (aged 12-20 years old) gender diverse autistic adolescents interviewed discussed challenges in verbalising and self-advocating for their gender identity. As such, autistic gender minoritised adolescents are at risk of being misunderstood in terms of their gender and gender needs.

Holding the strong belief that young people themselves must be the primary source of knowledge and respected as the experts of their own lives (Langsted, 1994; Morrow & Richards, 1996), my empirical research project thus sought to explore the voice and experiences of autistic, gender diverse adolescents, specifically exploring the gender stereotypes they experience and how gender stereotypes affect their sense of identity. The research also examined what enables adolescents to express their authentic identity. I chose to focus on the views of adolescents, as children and young people are often denied personhood. Eleven adolescents took part in semi-structured interviews, sharing their experiences and thoughts on gender stereotypes, reflecting upon the effect they have had on them growing up. Following reflective thematic analysis, the new understandings developed were used to inform implications for educational practitioners, external support agencies and young people for addressing gender rights and equality across a range of settings. As such, both papers sought to shift narratives surrounding autism, ensuring that they are formed by those for whom they are concerned.

Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology

When undertaking studies, researchers make a series of philosophical assumptions arising from beliefs, which determine the very nature of the research itself. Such beliefs relate to ontology (the nature and characteristics of reality), epistemology (what constitutes as knowledge and how phenomena come to be known or justified), axiology (the impact of held values in research) and methodology (the process of research) (Aliyu et al., 2015; Cresswell, 2013; Giacomini, 2010).

In the following Systematic Review (Chapter2), I held a position of constructivism. Thus, as the research is situated within a constructivist paradigm, in line with a relativist epistemology, conclusions presented were subjectively and exclusively produced, within my own social environment (Lee, 2012). Within the empirical study (Chapter 3), I utilised qualitative methodology, with decision making guided by a social constructionist epistemological position, in which different ways of understanding the world coexist which are intrinsically moulded by social cultural factors and consider knowledge as something that is socially constructed through human interaction (Burr, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Given this stance, I drew upon research underpinned by the social model and the human rights perspective of disability, which also extends to autism. These fields of thought regard ‘disability’ as a socially produced injustice by which individuals who are perceived to have ‘impairments’ are disadvantaged and marginalised (Lawson & Beckett, 2020). As such, in contrast with the individual or medical model of disability (Oliver, 1990), disability is viewed as a social construct, which is intrinsically shaped by ever-changing political, economic and social contexts (Biklen, 2000). The human rights perspective of disability seeks to shift from viewing individuals with disabilities as sources of ‘problems’ towards instead situating the ‘problem’ outside of the individual and valuing them as holders of rights (Quinn et al., 2002).

In line with epistemological principles of constructivist research, methodological approaches were chosen to allow exploration of adolescents’ lived experience and therefore gain an understanding of their unique views and perspectives.

For the systematic literature review presented in Chapter 2, a three-stage thematic synthesis approach, based on the work developed by Thomas and Harden (2008), was used. Thematic Synthesis is regarded as both an integrative and interpretive form of synthesis and thus deemed a suitable approach to both collate and summarise existing literature whilst also extending current understanding. The thematic synthesis values the distinctiveness and complexity of reviewed literature, enabling richer interpretation of particular phenomena and new insights that may not otherwise have been seen in individual primary studies (Flemming & Noyes, 2021).

In the empirical paper, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed qualitative data about participants’ experiences to be captured, thus enabling me to engage in inductive analysis, constructing ‘bottom-up’ themes (Levers, 2013).

Reflexivity: Positionality and Axiology

Reflexivity, that is, the awareness and consideration of how the “…researcher and the research process have shaped the collected data, including the role of prior assumptions and experience” (Mays & Pope, 2000, p. 51), is an essential aspect of a qualitative research approach. Given the integral role the researcher plays in the research process, from the study design, data collection, analysis and interpretation, it is vital to acknowledge and reflect upon how one’s individual perspectives, experiences, beliefs, values and personal biases shape the research. Therefore, the personal characteristics of the researcher, such as sex, age, gender, ethnicity and professional status, which in turn affect the researcher’s “distance” between participants, should be considered (Mays & Pope, 2000).

I am an educational psychology doctoral student and novice qualitative researcher, with an interest in child and young person voice, autonomy and identity. Throughout the research process, I was conscious of my positionality as an outsider to the participants. If prompted, I identify as a non-autistic cis female. Yet with all labels, this is reductive and does not fully capture aspects of my identity. Retrospectively, I have grown up without a strong sense of gender and associated societal expectations often placed on young children. This is something I now consider a fortunate position, in particular the concept that as a female, there were certain expectations of me or limitations to what I could or could not do on account of being female. I have, however, grown up in a cisnormative, patriarchal culture, and whilst I did not regularly experience strong overt gendered socialisation expectations or gender stereotypes in my immediate social groups as a young child, I did start to become aware of these during the latter stages of primary school. I often found myself on the edges of the typically clearly defined girls' and boys' social groups during playtimes, and whilst I joined in with the boys playing football, it was dull but preferable to the dance routines the girls were doing.

My awareness of gendered expectations certainly heightened during secondary school, and I became more aware of misogyny and sexism, though I did acquire a basic understanding of chauvinism from an early age via my mother. Thus, whilst I identify as cisgendered and therefore have not faced discrimination or stigma on account of my gender identity, I have been aware of and not always fitted rigid societal expectations surrounding femininity.

Yet, as a cisgender researcher, exploring my identity and my experiences of privilege on account of cisnormative societal expectations will have shaped every aspect of my approach to researching the experiences of individuals who identify as gender diverse. As Galupo (2017) also discusses, this will be seen from the initial research questions devised, the interview guide developed, the way in which I asked questions during interviews, which avenues I chose to explore further and which I chose not to, the manner in which participants may have viewed me, the manner in which I subsequently analysed the data and conceptualised the findings. Furthermore, rarely have I had to reflect upon my cisgender identity and the biases conferred from holding a cisgender perspective within a cis-normative society.

Additionally, I do not identify as autistic and again do not have lived experience or embodied understanding of what it means to be autistic, nor the impact that others' perceptions and views regarding autism can have on those who do identify as autistic. Given my personal identification, I was conscious from the outset that I myself do not identify with either of the key demographic characteristics explored in my thesis: gender diversity and autism.

In the early interviews, I was less sure of the appropriate language and terminology to use in order to explore participants' responses, without inadvertently mis-gendering them, especially as adolescents were recounting times before they 'came out'. I was also deeply aware of the potential power imbalance, given my age (in comparison to participants), my role as researcher and educational status. As a Millennial, there were at times cultural references referred to by Gen Z participants that I was less familiar with, which may have impacted mutual understanding. I did not explicitly share my gender identity with participants but sensed greater mutual understanding and instances of shared experiences during interviews with participants who seemed to have had gender socialisation experiences somewhat similar to my own, on account of the points highlighted above. I found I was able to relate at a personal level with the experiences discussed by participants who had had similar gender socialisation experiences to myself, which will have impacted the nature of the interviews. For instance, it could have created a greater sense of shared understanding between me and participants which may have enabled them to feel more comfortable to discuss such topics, especially more difficult topics and nuances of experiences. However, this shared understanding may have reduced the depth of explanation vocalised and thus apparent within transcripts on account of assumed mutual understanding. I found at times that I was less attuned to the experiences raised by participants who were assigned male at birth, on account of the polarising gender-based socialisation children often experience. I am aware that my approach to this research is through a feminist, social justice perspective and thus inherently interpretative based on my own assumptions and biases. This was something that was continually reflected upon during supervision sessions.

Values inherently shape the types of questions that researchers develop and ask. Aware of my own privileges in society, as a researcher, practitioner and indeed a human being, I am very much driven by and believe in promoting the voices of seldom heard groups in society and the importance of ensuring individuals who have been minoritised by societal practices and systems have a voice in reshaping an ever evolving society, with the hope that narratives and practices will continue to shift towards inclusivity for all. I therefore ensured to highlight the range of views and experiences adolescents shared. As such, I coded inductively and was driven by participant data, which resulted in many codes in both the systematic review and empirical papers. These codes thus reflected multiple topic areas. With respect to the themes developed, in both papers, I wanted to use, where possible, adolescents' direct quotes. I was conscious of presenting a full range of sentiments, reflecting both the difficulties that adolescents discussed, whilst also drawing out the pockets of hope which demonstrated adolescents' resolve and determination for change.

I am passionate about advocating for children and young people, in particular their right to autonomy and being respected as experts of their own lives. Throughout this research project, I often thought of an interaction I had with a young person whilst working in a special school. This young person was exploring their gender and unfortunately, experienced dismissal from some members of staff on account of their special educational needs and thus their chosen name and pronoun preferences were not always respected, so much so that the look of surprise when I did respect and thus use their chosen name and pronoun spoke volumes.

Ethical Considerations

Right from the conception to the design period and data collection, I was conscious of approaching my research as ethically as possible. Key considerations related to:

Accessibility and Representation: Participant information was provided in multiple formats to best ensure participants understood the details of the research, what their participation at each stage of the study would entail, their rights to only share information they feel comfortable doing so and their right to withdraw. This included the use of symbol support text.

Safeguarding and Wellbeing: Given the age of the participants and the nature of the discussion topic, parent/carer written consent was stipulated for potential participants under the age of 16 in addition to assent from participants. Participants' assent during interviews was monitored throughout, and participants were reminded they only needed to share information they were comfortable with sharing, could choose not to answer a specific question and had the right to withdraw their assent and end their participation at any time. Respecting Individuality: I am very aware of the varying views and preferences concerning language, to refer to both autism and gender diversity. Indeed, society's language is constantly evolving to reflect changing views and conceptualisations.

Regarding autism, there are different language preferences that exist amongst professionals, families and importantly, individuals who identify with autism themselves. Typically, these variations fall into either person-first (person with autism) or identity-first language (autistic person) preferences. I chose, for the purposes of continuity, to use identity-first language (autistic person). This was based on Kenny and colleagues' (2016) findings that British autistic adults and parents showed a preference for identity-first language. However, I was mindful that this would not be the case for all participants, and thus my choice of language was outlined in recruitment materials whilst also acknowledging that differences exist within the autistic community and are equally valid. To ensure participants were given autonomy, they were asked to indicate the language they would prefer to be used if specifically referring to them in the write-up of this study via a single-item, open-ended question.

Similarly, there are multiple shifting terms associated with gender identity, with terminology varying in its usage between individuals and groups (Gender Identity Research & Education Society, N.D). The terms gender diverse and gender diversity were used in research materials shared with participants and in the write-up of the research findings. Gender diversity refers to a person's gender identity, role, or expression which differs from the cultural norms prescribed for people of a particular sex, that is different from a unitary cisgender experience (Strang et al., 2018). As such, 'gender diverse' is an umbrella term to describe people without reference to a particular cultural norm, in a manner that is more affirming and potentially less stigmatising than other terms such as gender nonconformity (American Psychological Association [APA], 2015).

Again, participants were asked to define their gender identity through the use of a single-item, open-ended question as part of the demographics section of the research project. This allowed participants to define their own gender using terminology of their choosing and afforded the greatest freedom in defining identity, which does not rely upon the researcher to anticipate potential terms (Cameron & Stinson, 2019).

Adaptations to Methodology and Recruitment

The intention of the empirical research was to understand the lived experiences of adolescents who identified as autistic and gender diverse. Initially, I hoped that a key element of the empirical paper would entail taking a participatory research approach with utmost consideration of the five topics relevant to participatory research: Respect, Authenticity, Assumptions, Infrastructure and Empathy (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019). As such, I had started off with intentions to include consultation, in which community members provided expert advice on the design of the project and production of research materials. Unfortunately, time constraints meant such approaches were not feasible. I did, however, adopt an iterative methodology, with the exact methodology determined by participants themselves. Participants were therefore invited to decide the best approach for them to share their views. Furthermore, synthesised member checking was included.

Initial recruitment adopted purposive sampling to select participants (aged 11-17) from relevant charities and organisations, secondary schools and colleges, who identified as autistic and gender diverse. Two participants were recruited via this approach. Following approved ethics amendments, recruitment was subsequently extended to the use of Prolific (www.prolific.com) [February – March 2025]. Given user regulations, the age range for recruitment was increased to 18-25 years old. Ten participants were recruited via Prolific, one of whom did not proceed to the interview stage, leaving 9 participants.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with repeated words and speech tokens, such as “umm” and “uh”, retained for data transparency, in line with prioritising the generation of data that resembles real-world conversation (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Dissemination Plan

Participants who contributed to the empirical paper were offered the opportunity to receive a copy of the findings, and I shall provide a summary page to those who indicated interest.

Both research papers in this thesis have been written with the view of seeking publication in peer-reviewed journals. For Chapter 2, the systematic literature review, I am considering ‘Autism’, which focuses on reviews that provide a synthesis of an area of autism research, typically systematic reviews. For Chapter 3, the empirical research project, I am currently considering 'Neurodiversity', an international, peer-reviewed, open access journal which incorporates interdisciplinary approaches to the study of neurodevelopmental conditions and neurodiversity.

In order to submit to these journals for publication, papers will require further editing on account of the word limit. As such, I am also considering 'Qualitative Research in Psychology', given the generous word count allowance. This is an international, peer-reviewed journal, highlights the role of qualitative research in psychosocial studies and feminist psychology including the paradigmatic and philosophical issues that it raises, which speaks to points raised in my thesis around epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2017).

Additionally, other more widely accessible means of dissemination shall be sought to share findings and insights with a wider range of individuals. In line with suggestions from participants who took part in the synthesised member checking, I also seek to disseminate findings via a range of means, including social media, blogs and podcasts. I hope to be able to share findings within my Local Authority Educational Psychology Service and with colleagues in schools and colleges. I shall also be attending the International School Psychology Association Conference, a relevant international research conference to disseminate findings from the systematic literature review, presented in Chapter 2, with a wide range of researchers and practitioners.

Chapter 2 "I realise now that every single person in the world is different. Normal is just a word and it's irrelevant to us." Autistic adolescents' conceptualisation of autism. A Systematic Review and Thematic Synthesis

Abstract

Since autism was first defined, its conceptualisation has centred around differences from the "ordinary way", typically framed by a deficit-based model of disability. Hence autistic identity is subject to specific stigma and stressors, with detrimental implications for individual's wellbeing. Adolescence is a crucial stage in identity formation and autistic adolescents must navigate how autism forms their identity, a process called acculturation. In this systematic review, Thematic Synthesis was used to explore how adolescents, who identify as autistic, conceptualise and understand autism. Nineteen qualitative and mixed method research papers, which met inclusion criteria were analysed, representing the voices of 220 autistic adolescents. Five analytical themes were developed: (1) Borne from 'Knowledge': Epistemological and Ontological Status of Autism, (2) Influence of Societal Views, (3) Narratives in Immediate Social Network, (4) Integrating Multiple Perspectives and (5) Navigating Intersectionality and Acculturation. The notion of 'difference' was prevalent amongst adolescents, reflecting 'good', 'bad' and 'neutral' connotations. Wider societal narratives and the views of adolescents' immediate social networks, particularly their school environment, were key influences in shaping adolescents' conceptualisations. Differences in views and experiences were also notable amongst adolescents' accounts. How findings can inform a range of professionals, in Education, Health and Care settings and countering societal stigma is discussed.

Keywords: adolescents, autism, conceptualisation of autism, identity, acculturation

Introduction

Since its inception as a diagnostic term, autism has centred around differences from the "ordinary way" (Kanner, 1943, p. 242), with children's relation to others referred to as "altogether different" (Kanner, 1943, p. 246). Kanner's work would form the basis of what was termed 'Infantile Autism' in the American Psychiatric Association's 3rd edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III; American Psychological Society, 1980). This first formal diagnostic term consisted of six criteria, including 'Pervasive lack of responsiveness to other people' with two other criteria focusing on 'deficits' and 'peculiar' language development. Much of what is said to be known about autism and regarding autism as a discrete and stable entity, which can be discovered and diagnosed, has arisen from the accounts of clinicians and researchers (Verhoeff, 2013; Wolff, 2004).

The operationalisation and recognition of autism have changed drastically over the last century within research and practice. Happé and Frith (2020) discuss seven such changes, including; autism initially being regarded as a narrow definition to a broader diagnostic criteria; increasing prevalence estimates; something that prevails into adulthood as opposed to a childhood condition; from a distinct categorical diagnosis to recognising its heterogeneous and continuous nature; a shift to acknowledging its complex nature and associated comorbidities. Additionally, there has been a move away from the medical objectivist model conceptualising autism as a 'developmental disorder' typified by deficit, towards the social constructionist model of neurodivergence, reflecting a social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006; 2017), including the proposed 'double empathy problem' (Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2022). Indeed, Botha (2021), an autistic researcher, highlights that the concept of autism is inherently situated to time, place, and culture.

Whilst the conceptualisation of autism within research and practice has evolved, current dominant ideologies, rooted in a medical objectivist model, continue to inform mainstream discourse, which can lead to misconceptions and stigma in society. Stigmatising and stereotypical narratives are prevalent in mainstream media (Holton et al., 2014; Hungerford et al., 2025; Mittmann et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2023). Stereotypical conceptualisations of autism and therefore autistic people can be seen amongst individuals who associated the following characteristics with autistic individuals; poor social and communication skills perceived isolation and introversion, poor communication and difficult personality or behaviour, with the majority of such characteristics regarded negatively (Wood & Freeth, 2016). Holding such stereotypical views is also associated with non-autistic individuals dehumanising autistic individuals, in which autistic individuals are seen as 'less than' (Cage et al., 2019).

Social identity theory, (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987), that highlight how an individual's self-concept can be shaped by their group memberships, including the perceived societal status of these groups (Turner, 1999), have been suggested as useful frameworks to understand Autism identity (Cooper et al., 2017). Many autistic individuals regard autism as a key component of their multifaceted identities and thus inherent to their existence. Yet at the same time, autistic individuals have discussed the discrepancies between how they perceive autism and how society does (Botha et al., 2022). Botha and colleagues (2022) found that autistic adults regarded autism as being central to their identity and whilst they thought of autism as neutral, they shared their views and experiences of society conferring negative meanings onto autism, and consequently themself. Participants recounted frequent, damaging experiences of stigma and the ways they navigated this varied from reframing and reclaiming language to the considered use of concealment and disclosure. Research has also found a highly significant negative correlation between how participants feel the public perceives individuals who identify as autistic, with their overall levels of camouflaging, i.e., approaches taken to hide traits associated with autism (Perry et al., 2022). This suggests that individuals may feel compelled to camouflage as a method of stigma management (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). As such, autistic individuals can be regarded as an identity-based minority, who experience disadvantage and stigmatised social status, leading to social stress (Botha & Frost, 2020). In line with minority stress theory, such stigma, prejudice, and discrimination can contribute to poorer mental health for autistic individuals (Meyer, 2007; Botha & Frost, 2020).

The impact of stigma is perhaps especially significant for adolescents. Autistic adolescents are more likely to experience bullying than their non-autistic peers (Cappadocia et al., 2012), with estimates ranging from approximately 46% (Sterzing et al., 2012) to as high as 94% (Little et al., 2002). In comparison to peers, autistic adolescents are more likely to report having peers ‘who do not like them’, experience verbal and physical abuse and social exclusion (Wainscot et al., 2008). Hebron and Humphrey’s (2014a) multi-informant study suggested that older autistic children, along with those receiving special educational needs provision, were more likely to be bullied than younger autistic adolescents not receiving such provision. Not only are autistic adolescents more likely to experience bullying, but they are also thought to be affected disproportionately by poorer outcomes associated with bullying, reflecting a ‘double disadvantage’ (Humphrey & Hebron, 2015), with a potential impact on self-identity.

Adolescence is a crucial stage for identity formation in which young people navigate establishing themselves as unique individuals, in the context of pre-existing sociocultural categories (Branje et al., 2021; van Doeselaar et al., 2018). Thus, the social, cultural and historical context shapes one’s identity, and in turn, one’s individual life narrative is thought to form the foundation of identity (Erikson, 1968, as cited in Kroger, 2006). Identity formation is a dynamic process of saliency with identity markers subjective to the individual and subject to change. According to dual-cycle identity models, adolescents both explore and commit to identities in a complex, interconnected process (Branje et al., 2021).

Autistic adolescents additionally navigate how autism shapes their identity, a process called acculturation (Cresswell & Cage, 2019). Acculturation, in which individuals with varying cultures interact with and thus subsequently alter their culture patterns, is typically associated with conflict and negotiation (Berry, 2005). Sociocultural discourses surrounding autism, along with social interactions, have been found to impact autistic adolescents’ identity construction (Bottema-Beutel & Smith, 2013). For autistic adolescents, the views of peers and teachers in the school environment can influence their stance on autism and thus identity construction. Autistic adolescents can often try to mask their perceived differences in school, which can include reluctance to engage in school-based support given adverse social inclusion consequences, such as bullying and ostracisation (Mesa & Hamilton, 2022). However, efforts to minimise perceived differences can have detrimental consequences on autistic individual's wellbeing and mental health (Cage & Troxwell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2017; Hull et al., 2021). Indeed, rates of anxiety and depression are higher for autistic adolescents, with findings highlighting the role of social relationships, group membership and social integration, understanding of autism, along with a sense of difference as key factors raised by autistic adolescents (Butzer & Konstantareas, 2003; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014b; Pearson et al., 2006). Hence autistic adolescents' identity construction and identity are subject to specific stigma and stressors, with detrimental implications on wellbeing and mental health.

Multiple, often contradictory, perspectives for understanding and conceptualising autism, have and continue to exist, within literature, amongst practitioners and indeed society (Verhoeff, 2013; Wolff, 2004). For instance, cognitivist-rooted models, including 'central coherence' (Happé, 1999; Happé & Frith, 1996), 'mindblindness' (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Frith, 2003) and the 'extreme male brain' (Baron-Cohen, 2002) reflect deficit-based individualist accounts. Approaches stemming from the neurodiversity movement, which regards autism as an inseparable aspect of identity, such as the 'double empathy problem' (Kapp et al., 2013; Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2022; Pellicano & Houting, 2022) have become more widespread. However, autism research can fail to attend to the views and voices of those with embodied experience, those who have specialist expertise, the voice of autistic people themselves, bringing into question the epistemological integrity of some studies (Chown et al., 2017; Milton, 2012; 2014; Woods et al., 2018). Epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2017) in which an individual's capacity as a knower or epistemic agent who creates, uses, or conveys knowledge, including their lived experience is dismissed, affects autistic individuals (Catala et al., 2021). Furthermore, there is a paucity of research that examines how autistic individuals navigate such an array of often, deficit-based, conflicting narratives or indeed how this shapes their own conceptualisation of autism and thus autistic identity (Bagatell, 2007; 2010).

In line with a social constructionist model of neurodivergence, the current systematic review seeks to shift prevalent claims of knowledge regarding autism by exploring how autism is conceptualised by those who identify as autistic, particularly adolescents, respecting them as epistemic agents who are the experts of their own lives (Catala et al., 2021; Langsted, 1994; Morrow

& Richards, 1996). In line with Article 12 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), understanding how autistic adolescents conceptualise autism, and ensuring their voices are heard on matters that directly affect them is imperative.

The following systematic literature review explores the question; How do adolescents, who identify as autistic, conceptualise autism? The term conceptualisation was specifically used to enable a broad exploration of how adolescents form and organise ideas and concepts surrounding autism. This included the sources of information and views adolescents encounter and experience and as such the conceptual frameworks created which shape not only their concept of autism but also themselves as autistic individuals.

Methodology

Selection and search strategy

Based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) approach (Moher et al., 2009), a systematic search strategy was conducted as outlined in Figure 1. Seven electronic databases (PsychINFO, Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, CINAHL, Global Index Medicus and SciELO) were chosen based on their relevance to psychology and education, whilst also endeavouring to reflect varied professional fields and countries. The review protocol was registered on Prospero https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/PROSPERO/view/CRD42024595698.

The bibliographic database search strategy was devised with the aim of reaching a balance between sensitivity and specificity. In line with the view that terminology around autism reflects social phenomenon shaped by political, economic and social contexts, an ethnocentric search approach, grounded in Western culture was therefore adopted. As such, it combined terms related to autism, including, autism, autistic, Aspergers, aspie, pervasive developmental disorder and pathological demand avoidance, as well as acronyms such as ASD and ASC to capture the range of terms used throughout the literature. Participant age terms included adolescents, teens/ teenager, young adults, youth, young people, minors and children. The following terms were used for conceptualisation and identity with respect to autism, conceptualisation/description/definition of autism, self-concept, view and identity. Terms were used using the Boolean operators ‘OR’ and

‘AND’, with search syntax adapted accordingly for each database where applicable (see Appendix A). Proximity/ adjacency searching, as well as citation chaining and forward searching, was adopted to incorporate a range of papers with overlapping focus. Database searches were conducted on 5th and 6th October 2024.

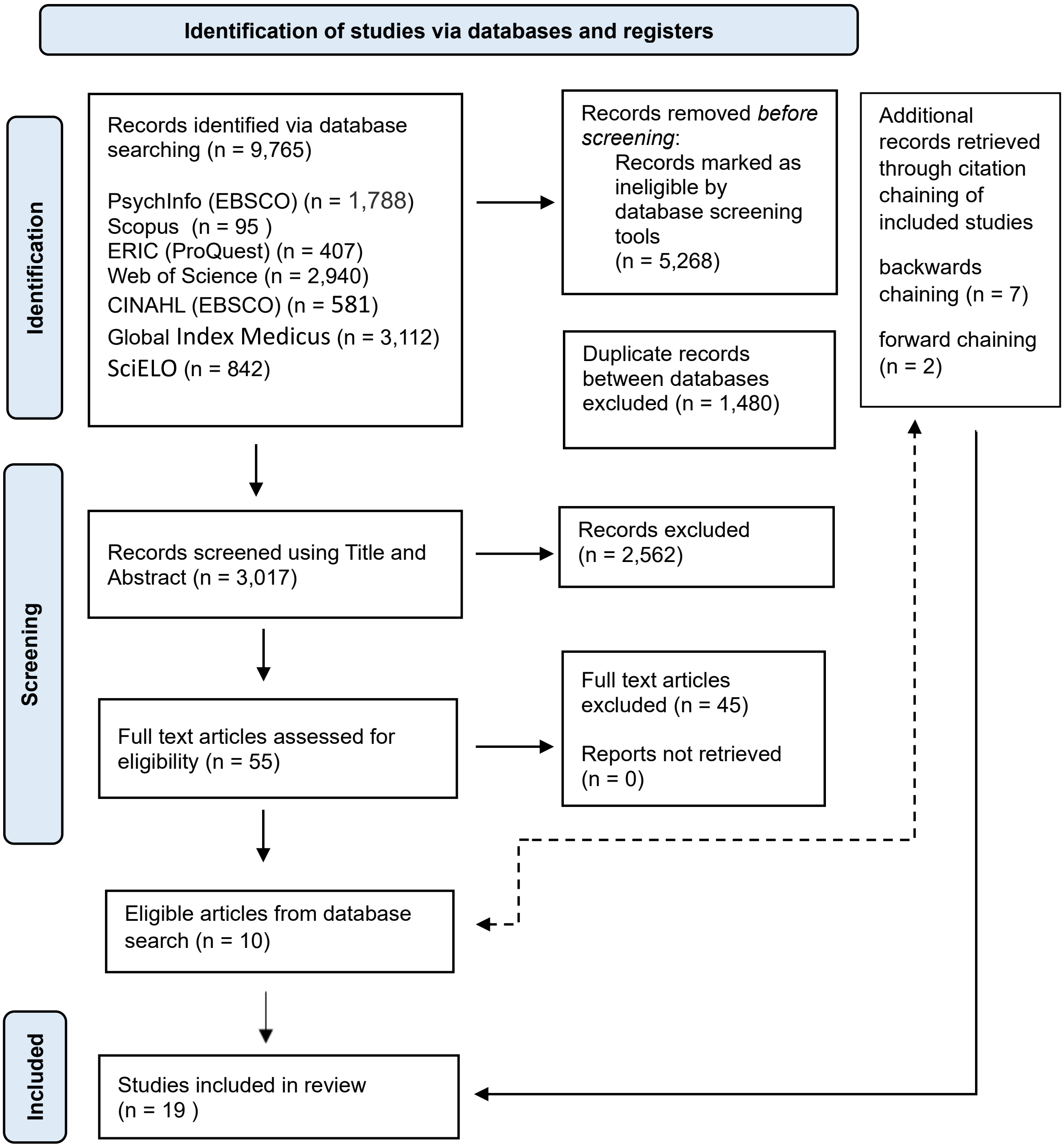
Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Adolescent participants are autistic (diagnosed/assessed or self-reported).	Adolescent participants are not autistic (diagnosed/assessed or self-reported).
Adolescent participants are aged between 10 – 19 years old.	Adolescent participants are not aged between 10 – 19 years old.
Research related to adolescents' conceptualisation of autism.	Research not related to adolescents' conceptualisation of autism.
Primary research (e.g., empirical article, thesis or dissertation).	Non-empirical papers (e.g., opinion pieces, theoretical papers, book chapters) or review papers.
Papers employ a qualitative or mixed methods approach.	Papers do not employ a qualitative or mixed methods approach.
Full text available in English.	Full text not available in English.

Figure 1

Systematic Search Strategy Utilising the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) Approach (Moher et al., 2009)



Results

As depicted in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1), searches yielded 9,765 papers of which 5,268 were removed using database screening tools, in line with the current study's inclusion and exclusion criteria. Additionally, 1,480 duplicates were removed. Title and abstract screening, using the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1), resulted in the exclusion of 2,562 articles. Of the remaining 55 articles, 45 articles were removed following assessment for eligibility through full-text review. Citation chaining (backwards and forwards) of the 10 identified articles yielded nine further articles which met the inclusion criteria. As such, 19 articles (18 qualitative and one mix-methods) were identified for synthesis.

Quality Assurance

All 19 articles were quality assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, for qualitative research (2023). Scoring ranged from 3 to a maximum of 10. Most of the studies (12) did not sufficiently take into account the relationship between researchers and participants (criterion 6). Unfulfilled criteria were mostly due to limited reporting as opposed to being judged unsatisfactory. The reported methodological quality of included studies and their characteristics are presented in Table 2.

Data Synthesis

Only text within each study's results or findings sections pertaining to adolescents' views were included (i.e., participant quotations and author interpretations). NVivo 14 was used to store and code data. Based upon Thomas and Harden's (2008) work, an interpretive three-stage thematic synthesis approach was conducted, with the aim of integrating concepts and narratives from multiple studies. In line with the aim of exploring adolescents' conceptualisation of autism and generating new insights, thematic synthesis was deemed suitable as it enables researchers to draw upon studies with differing aims and methodologies (Gough et al., 2012). In line with the researcher's constructivist epistemological position, thematic synthesis is suited to research seeking to describe peoples' beliefs, attitudes and expectations (Flemming & Noyes, 2021). Consequently, the researcher's interaction with and interpretation of the data created novel understanding and thus knowledge.

During stage one, sentences in the included data were coded to reflect meaning and content, with sentences often receiving multiple codes, portraying multiple meanings. Throughout stage one, codes were revisited and refined to reflect evolving concepts between studies. In total, 82 initial codes were derived inductively, led by participant data. Stage 2 entailed identifying and grouping similar codes, which led to the formation of 13 descriptive themes. Descriptive themes remained close to the data representing the shared meaning of these groups of initial codes. Details of the prevalence of these descriptive themes are illustrated in Table 3. As outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008), Stage 3 entailed 'going beyond' the content of the original studies and generating new concepts and understandings. As such, descriptive themes were used to generate new conceptual links and explanations. Synthesisised member checking, with two participants was undertaken to explore if researcher developed themes, resonated with participants' personal views. Participants were given the opportunity to rate to what extent initial developed themes reflected their personal understanding and provide further comment if they wished (see Appendix C). Participant feedback was considered in light of the research question; How do adolescents, who identify as autistic, conceptualise autism?

Table 2

Characteristics of the Reviewed Studies and Quality Appraisal

First Author and Year	Country	Research Question or Aim	Sampling Approach	Participant Characteristics	Data Collection Approach	Analysis Approach	Quality Assurance
Alexander & Bissaker (2023)	Australia	"How do teachers and autistic adolescents conceptualize autism, and what influences the development of these ideas?" (p. 3).	Purposive Sampling	Four autistic adolescents. (No further demographic information provided).	Sem-structured interviews	Thematic Analysis	8
Anilmis (2018)	UK	"How do young people perceive their experiences of receiving a diagnosis of ASD?" (p. 83)	Purposive Sampling	Seven autistic young people (12 - 15 years old) (6 M, 1F). 3 White British, 4 Asian British (1 Bangladeshi, 2 Indian, 1 Malaysian/Chinese). All aware of their autism diagnosis.	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic Analysis	10
Baines (2012)	USA	"How do youth with disabilities develop identities as learners through their experiences social contexts?" (p. 548).	Purposive Sampling	"two high school students on the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum … deliberately do not directly address the validity of the autism diagnosis for each student" (p. 548). "11th-grader with Asperger's syndrome, and … a 12th-grader labelled with autism" (p. 550). Gender not explicitly stated, masculine pronouns used for both.	Ethnography (Two years of interviews and participant observations)	Ethnography	3
Berkovits et al., (2019)	USA	"This study seeks to elicit and describe the experiences of adolescents with ASD in order to further our understanding of adolescent perceptions of the diagnosis and what "being on the spectrum" means for them." (p. 833).	Purposive Sampling	Thirty eight adolescents with a previous diagnosis of Autism by an outside provider. 33 males and 5 females. Mean age 15.1 Race/ethnicity:	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic Coding	8

First Author and Year	Country	Research Question or Aim	Sampling Approach	Participant Characteristics	Data Collection Approach	Analysis Approach	Quality Assurance
				60.5 % Caucasian/Non-Hispanic, 15.8 % Latino/Hispanic, 23.7 %, Black/Asian/Other.			
Cridland et al., (2015)	Australia	"The overarching aim of this study was to understand the perceptions and experiences of adolescents with ASD from a personal construct psychology perspective. Qualitative data collection methods and analyses were used to gain detailed perspectives of the lived experiences of adolescents with ASD and their families." (p. 355).	Unclear based on information provided	Seven autistic adolescent males aged 12-16. All participants were formally diagnosed.	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic Analysis	6
Ford (2023)	Australia	"•What are adolescents' experiences and perceptions of receiving an autism diagnosis? • In what ways do adolescents on the spectrum feel different from others and how do these feelings impact their development of self? • What factors do adolescents on the autism spectrum perceive to have contributed to the development of their self-identity? • How can Kelly's (1955) PCT assist in developing understandings about the lived experiences of adolescents on the autism spectrum?" (p. 20).	Non-probability sampling and purposive sampling.	Ten adolescents (4 F, 6 M) aged between 13-18, "who had a formal diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder without an ID [intellectual disability]" (p. 86).	Nine participants - semi structured online interviews. One participant completed interview autonomously via email	Constant Comparative Analysis Method	10

First Author and Year	Country	Research Question or Aim	Sampling Approach	Participant Characteristics	Data Collection Approach	Analysis Approach	Quality Assurance
Humphrey & Lewis, (2008)	UK	"objectives were: 1 to explore the views of pupils with AS about mainstream education 2 to document the everyday experiences of such pupils in mainstream schools 3 to identify practices in mainstream schools that facilitate or constrain the learning and participation of students with AS 4 to use objectives 1, 2 and 3 to provide a framework for the development of effective inclusive practices in this area." (p. 25).	Purposive sampling	Twenty autistic adolescents aged 11–17 years.	Semi-structured interviews, Pupil diaries and Pupil drawings	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis	8
King et al., (2017)	UK	"The specific aim of the present study was to use photo-elicitation interviews to explore the nature of self-understanding in adolescent boys diagnosed with an ASC." (p. 233).	Purposive Sampling	Five adolescent males (13 -15 years old) with a formal diagnosis of Autism or Asperger syndrome.	Participants given disposable cameras and asked to create a series of photographs that represent who they are. Photographs used to support open-ended, semi-structured interviews.	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis	8
Kofke (2019)	USA	"The following research questions are proposed for this study:			Semi-structured interviews -		

First Author and Year	Country	Research Question or Aim	Sampling Approach	Participant Characteristics	Data Collection Approach	Analysis Approach	Quality Assurance
		1. What are the perspectives of adolescent autistic students who identify as female, girl, or young woman on their experiences learning and using social skills in high school? i. How do these students interpret and make use of the social skills instruction they receive? ii. What other school-based experiences contribute to the students' perspectives on learning and using social skills? 2. How does the ongoing work of learning social skills at school, via instruction or otherwise, contribute to the students' perspectives on the development of an autistic/disability identity?" (p. 5).	Purposive and Convenience Sampling	Four White female adolescents (14-15 years old). Self-identified as autistic or have Aspergers.	using participants photographs of spaces and people at school who have social importance to them.	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis	10
Mogensen & Mason (2015)	Australia	"One aim of this research was to learn about the lives of a small group of young people diagnosed with autism, from their own experiences. Another aim was to use methods to facilitate their direct participation in the study. (p. 84).	Purposive Sampling	Five adolescents, aged between 13 and 19 years, "diagnosed with different forms of autism" (p. 85).	Face-to-face interviews, drawings, photos, communication cards and e-mails.	Thematic Analysis	7
Morgan (2023)	UK based, participants from UK, US and Canada	"How do adolescent girls, diagnosed with autism in adolescence, construct their self concepts and social identities?" (p. 181).	Purposive Sampling	Ten females with a diagnosis of autism, between 14 and 19 years old.	Blog/journal entries written independently by participants (n = 6) and semi-structured online	Adapted from Discourse Analysis	9

First Author and Year	Country	Research Question or Aim	Sampling Approach	Participant Characteristics	Data Collection Approach	Analysis Approach	Quality Assurance
					interviews (n = 4).		
Myers (2012)	USA	"This study was designed to examine issues of identity for adolescents with autism through the use of multimodal literacies, including the autobiographical writings, art, video and audio productions, and photography of these adolescents." (p. 48).	Unclear based on information provided	"Approximately twelve adolescents ranging in age from 12 to 17 were enrolled in the group at the time of this study. The group is primarily male, with only two girls regularly attending" (p. 33).	Multimodal literacies, including autobiographical writings, art, video and audio and photography.	Thematic Analysis, Phenomenological Analysis and Discourse Analysis	8
Riccio (2021)	USA	"1. Do parents' decisions about disclosing their child's autism diagnosis to their child impact their child's autism understanding in adolescence? Hypothesis: Adolescents whose parents informed them that they are autistic will be better able to define autism and will include more strengths in their definitions of autism than autistic peers whose parents did not inform them of their diagnosis. 2. Do parental perceptions of autism influence their child's perception of autism? Hypothesis: Definitions of autism given by adolescents will mirror their parents' definitions of autism. 3. Does parental disclosure influence adolescents' self-descriptions?" (p. 376).	Purposive Sampling	Nineteen adolescents (ages 14–19 years, M age = 15.9 years, n = 18 males), with a parent-confirmed autism spectrum diagnosis.	Semi-structured Interviews.	Directed Content Analysis	7
Rice (2023)	UK	"1. How do autistic pupils negotiate a developing sense of self? 1.1. What do pupils identify as influencing the conceptualisation, presentation, and	Convenience Sampling	Eight autistic adolescents, aged 12-16 years old, 6 male, 2 female. Participants had a diagnosis of autism.	Range of methods available. Following chosen:	Thematic Analysis	10

First Author and Year	Country	Research Question or Aim	Sampling Approach	Participant Characteristics	Data Collection Approach	Analysis Approach	Quality Assurance
		evaluation of their sense of self? 1.2. What are the pupils' views of the school's enablers or barriers to developing a positive sense of self? 2. What are the pupils' views of the participatory research methods employed in the sense of self study?" (p. 12).			photography, collage, drawing, film with subsequent elicitation interview, vlog, interview with researcher, interview with peer, focus group, diary, twenty statements test, numbering and ordering tasks, PowerPoint, Video Game.		
Samra (2016)	UK	"Research Question: What do YP diagnosed with ASCs say about their lives? Research Question: What do the stories that YP diagnosed with ASCs tell us about their identities?" (p. 5)	Convenience Sampling	Six adolescents between the ages of 15-18 years old, "aware of their diagnosis of an ASC." (p. 108)	Narrative Interviews	Narrative Oriented Inquiry	9
Stevenson et al., (2016)	UK	"… 'what does ASD mean to me?' and the questions linked to this that were conceived and asked by the participants (with some help from facilitator and podcaster)" (p. 215)	Convenience Sampling	Eight adolescents. From the KS4 group: Three males, one female. From the sixth form group: two males and two females. All adolescents were aware of their autism diagnosis.	Online Discussion Groups	Thematic Analysis	5

First Author and Year	Country	Research Question or Aim	Sampling Approach	Participant Characteristics	Data Collection Approach	Analysis Approach	Quality Assurance
Tesfaye et al., (2023)	Canada	"Exploring key themes regarding facilitators and barriers youth perceived throughout multiple environmental contexts and social relationships, in addition to their aspirations and hopes for the future." (p. 1143).	Purposeful sampling	Thirty-one autistic adolescents (6 female, 26 male) 11 and 18 years of age (M = 15.41, standard deviation (SD) = 2.26). All had received an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis. 74% identified as Caucasian, 9.7% Arab/West Asian, 3.2% South East Asian, 6.5% South Asian, 3.2% Black and 3.2% Mixed ethnicity.	Semi-structured Interviews	Thematic Analysis	8
Trew (2024)	Australia	"… this study aimed to understand how autistic adolescents perceive and experience autism through an exploration of their autism narratives. By doing so, this study aims to add value and enrich this body of work by adding the perspectives of an autistic adolescent group." (p. 3).	Purposeful sampling	Eleven autistic adolescents (12–19 years of age), 4 females, 6 males, and 1 non-binary individual. Most participants, (9), were Australian and 2 participants were Sri-Lankan.	Semi-structured Interviews	Constructivist grounded theory analysis including Thematic Analysis	8
Winstone et al., (2014)	UK	"The specific aims of the interviews were to explore: • Young people's self-perception and self-awareness; • If and how the young people can project themselves into the future; • Participants' perceptions of themselves as a person diagnosed with autism; • Participants' comparisons of themselves with others." (p. 192).	Convenience Sampling	Thirteen males (5 semi-structured approach, 8 additional, Activity-oriented interviews) Participants were between 12 and 14 years old (mean age = 13.2).	Semi-structured and Activity Oriented Interviews	Thematic Analysis	10

Table 3

Descriptive Themes Identified in Each Reviewed Study

	First Author and Year																		
	Alexander & Bissaker (2023)	Anilmis (2018)	Baines (2012)	Berkovits et al., (2019)	Cridland et al., (2015)	Ford (2023)	Humphrey & Lewis (2008)	King et al., (2017)	Kofke (2019)	Mogensen & Mason (2015)	Morgan (2023)	Myers (2012)	Ricco (2021)	Rice (2023)	Samra (2016)	Stevenson et al., (2016)	Tesfaye et al., (2023)	Trew (2024)	Winstone et al., (2014)
Descriptive Theme																			
Evaluative Stance on Autism	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Autism has Various Different Characteristics	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Formative Role of School in Young People's Lives	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	N	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The Importance and Value of Social Connections	N	N	N	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	N	✓	✓	N	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	N
Advocacy, a fine balancing act between needs and rights	✓	✓	✓	N	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	N	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Considerations for Future Self	N	✓	✓	N	N	✓	N	✓	✓	N	✓	✓	N	✓	✓	N	✓	N	✓

	First Author and Year																		
	Alexander & Bissaker (2023)	Anilmis (2018)	Baines (2012)	Berkovits et al., (2019)	Cridland et al., (2015)	Ford (2023)	Humphrey & Lewis (2008)	King et al., (2017)	Kofke (2019)	Mogensen & Mason (2015)	Morgan (2023)	Myers (2012)	Ricco (2021)	Rice (2023)	Samra (2016)	Stevenson et al., (2016)	Tesfaye et al., (2023)	Trew (2024)	Winstone et al., (2014)
Autistic Community (common experiences)	✓	N	N	N	N	✓	N	N	✓	✓	✓	✓	N	✓	✓	✓	✓	N	N
Adapting Presentation of Self	N	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	N	✓	N
Young people as complex, free agents	✓	✓	✓	N	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	N	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Autistic Individuals' Place and Status in Society	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individual and Collective 'Knowledge' about Autism	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Difference, the Good the Bad and the Neutral	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Young People Navigating a Multifaceted Identity (Autistic Identity/ Intersectionality)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note. ✓ indicates that the descriptive theme was evident in the study. N indicates that the theme was not evident in the study.

Researcher Positionality

The current research is situated within a constructivist paradigm and thus in line with a relativist epistemology, conclusions presented have been subjectively produced by the researchers, within their own social environment (Lee, 2012). The positionality of the lead researcher, as an outsider to the autistic community, was continually reflected upon during frequent supervision sessions within the research team. As a trainee Educational Psychologist, awareness of findings from previous studies would have consequently shaped the lead researcher's approach to the bibliographic literature search and consequent analysis.

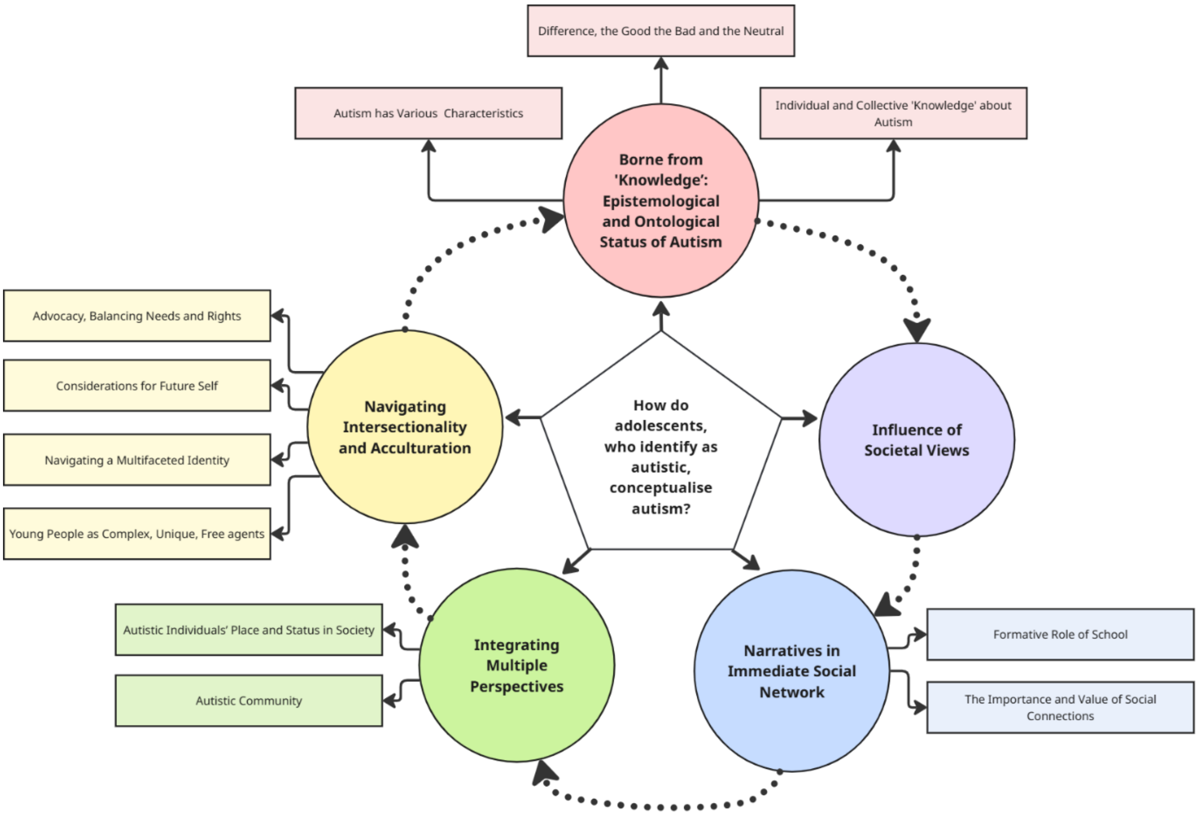
Synthesis

Synthesis Overview

Nineteen papers were included in this synthesis, spanning a 16-year period between 2008 and 2024. All of the papers were based in the Western World, UK (8), Australia (5), USA (5) and Canada (1). The 19 papers represented the voice of 220 autistic adolescents, aged between 11 and 19 years, based on reported ages although some studies did not report this data. In response to the research question, 'How do adolescents, who identify as autistic, conceptualise autism?', five analytical themes were developed from initial descriptive themes, as illustrated in Figure 2. These themes address how adolescents, describe, perceive and evaluate autism, as well as examining the processes and circumstances that lead to the formation of these conceptualisations. Reflective of the interconnectedness of adolescents' experiences and understanding, most descriptive themes contributed to one or more analytic theme. Illustrative quotes from included studies have been incorporated to represent themes.

Figure 2

Analytical Themes and Subthemes



Note. Analytical themes are shown in circles with subthemes represented in boxes. The doted arrows between the analytical themes indicate the interconnectedness of the themes and how one shapes the other, often in a cyclic nature as conceptualisations are re-examined and reconstructed through adolescence and identity formation.

Analytical Themes

Borne from 'Knowledge': Epistemological and Ontological Status of Autism. This theme captures how adolescents describe and evaluate autism, including the dominant theoretical and conceptual frameworks that align with their stances.

Autism has Various Characteristics. Adolescents expressed a conceptualisation of autism as encompassing common yet multifaceted characteristics and traits, such as physical and sensory processing differences (Kofke, 2019), communication differences, differences in navigating social interactions amongst peers (Ford, 2023; Rice, 2021) and difficulties expressing and regulating emotions (Cridland et al., 2025; Ford, 2023; Mogenson & Mason, 2015).

Adolescents frequently spoke about their thinking and processing style, “I tend to think already outside the box. I think of things differently, I think about how to achieve them quickly or efficiently, or sometimes the most simplistic or complex way of doing it.” (Berkovits et al., 2020, p. 838).

Novel thinking was typically associated with creativity and regarded as a “…manifestation of [one’s] autistic neurology.” (Kofke, 2019, p. 94). Adolescents discussed having “topics of passion” or a “special interest” (Ford, 2023, p. 125). As well as recognising characteristics in themselves, some adolescents discussed recognising characteristics in others. Hence, adolescents spoke of both observed and embodied phenomena which they attributed to autism. In addition to the notion of common characteristics, adolescents were keen to stress individuality and that “…all people on the spectrum aren’t the same.” (Trew, 2024, p. 12). Therefore, adolescents conceptualised both a commonality in the autistic experience, while also highlighting variation within such commonalities.

Difference, the Good the Bad and the Neutral. Adolescents repeatedly framed autism as something which made them “…different from other people.” (Myers, 2012, p. 128). Sense of difference was coupled with comparison to individuals without autism throughout (King et al., 2019; Kofke, 2019; Rice, 2021; Samra, 2016). Such comparisons and the sense of difference were evaluated, as good (Animis, 2018; Mogensen & Mason, 2015; Trew 2024), bad (Baines, 2012; Rice, 2021; Samra, 2016) and neutral (Animis, 2018; Myers, 2012; Riccio et al., 2021). One adolescent shared that "…the good aspects of autism that I have over-ride the bad aspects making me feel happy/ proud to have autism…" (Rice, 2021, p. 185). Another adolescent felt that:

> Having autism can be good though, like I feel I look at the world in a different way … a bit like what an artist would look at it, or a film director, and it's a really interesting way like, to see it from my eyes. (Stevenson et al., 2016, p. 219)

Negative conceptualisations appeared to be rooted in difficulties experienced, including environmental challenges, such as sensory sensitivities (Ford, 2023; Kofke, 2019; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008) and perceived limitations, "…autism is a ball and chain holding you back." (Stevenson, 2016, p. 230) or detrimental social experiences:

> I often feel excluded by students in my year group. I sometimes feel sad. I feel like this because people make fun of me. I never feel complete or whole. I feel like something is missing. I feel like this because I am different. (Ford, 2023, p. 141)

For some, differences associated with autism were neither good nor bad (Anilmis, 2018; Riccio et al., 2021) and one study found no clear preference for regarding being autistic as either negative or positive (Tesfaye et al., 2023). One adolescent explained, "… autism does not make someone inferior, it just makes them different" (Anilmis, 2018, p. 113). The notion of difference was shared in creative ways. One adolescent discussed their drawing in response to the statement 'autism is', demonstrating that '…the colours in the drawing show how he is different to others but not necessarily better or worse." (Rice, 2021, p. 177). As such, conceptualisations of autism and subsequent evaluative stances were wide-ranging, encompassing the good, the bad and the neutral.

Individual and Collective 'Knowledge' about Autism. Predominantly, adolescents' conceptualisation of autism aligned with a medical or neurodevelopmental model. For some, autism was viewed "…as a difference in biology where "the brain is different" (Anilmis, 2018, p. 105) and a "neurological condition" (Riccio et al., 2021, p. 378). Adolescents explained that autistic people "…were born with a different, with a different kind of brain" (Kofke, 2019, p. 132). Whilst for others, autism was seen through a deficit, medical model lens, as a "developmental disorder", or "mental illness" (Anilmis, 2018, p. 105). Some adolescents explained autism as having a "bad brain" or "mental syndrome" (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008, p. 30) or suggesting that their "…brain wasn't developed properly…" (Stevenson et al., 2016 p. 217).

For some, there was the sense of autism being separate from them and making them do things, "sometimes my brain goes silly and gets angry at me" (Trew, 2024, p. 13). This was linked to adolescents experiencing emotions deeply, like anger and upset (Ford, 2023; Morgan, 2023; Trew, 2024), which was typically accompanied by negative evaluations and a sense of shame (Samra, 2016). In line with a medical, deficit model, some participants, regarded autism as something that needed to be treated (Baines, 2012). This was often associated with receiving an autism diagnosis. For many adolescents, receiving a diagnosis, served as a catalyst in their understanding of autism, with many explaining they initially had "…no idea, no clue what it was." (Anilmis, 2018, p. 102). For some, receiving a diagnosis, made them "legitimately autistic" (Morgan 2023, p. 184). As such, for many adolescents, receiving a diagnosis was often regarded as a pivotal moment in their lives and consequently their understanding of autism.

Influence of Societal Views.

The second theme highlights the influence of wider societal views on adolescents' conceptualisation of autism. Notably, adolescents discussed narrow or stereotypical portrayals of autism in media and popular culture (Samara, 2016; Alexander & Bissaker, 2023). One adolescent shared "…in the news, or something, they said...all autistic people like manga…" (Anilmis, 2018, p. 105). Social media was also highlighted as a source which shaped wider societal views. Media and the internet were often noted to portray an inaccurate view of autism, which adolescents felt perpetuated stigma attached to the autism label (Anilmis, 2018; Ford, 2023). Adolescents shared differences between observed and embodied characteristics of autism, thus a contrast in the conceptualization of autism among non-autistic individuals and autistic adolescents (Kofke, 2019; Morgan, 2023). Alexander and Bissaker explained that "…experienced teachers still viewed autism as separate from the students, while the students conceived of autism as part of who they were." (2023, p. 8). Adolescents' accounts of others' perceptions, tended to confer stigmatising or stereotypical definitions of autism, which assumed cognitive, social and behavioural difficulties (Alexander & Bissaker, 2023; Anilmis, 2018; Baines, 2012; Berkovits et al., 2020). Many adolescents internalised such views and struggled to navigate an autism diagnosis with their own sense of identity (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Mogensen & Mason, 2015; Riccio et al., 2020). Indeed, Kofke highlighted how one adolescent felt "infantilized by adults" and that "Her negative perception about being autistic was connected to her concern about differences in expectations others had for her versus expectations she had for herself." (2019, p. 132). Another adolescent shared how others, "make a mockery" of autism, using the term as an insult (Rice, 2021, p. 180). Not all societal views were solely negative, adolescents highlighted positive views, albeit limited and stereotypical, such as autistic people are "smarter" or a "genius" (Berkovits et al., 2020, p. 838).

Narratives in Immediate Social Network. Adolescents' conceptualisations of autism seemed directly and indirectly influenced by narratives existing in their immediate social network, such as their family, friends and school community.

Formative Role of School. Notably, adolescents referred to the narratives about autism conferred from their school social environment, from their peers, friends and teachers. School was often seen as a conflicting environment (Tresfaye et al., 2023). For some, school represented a space of judgement in which adolescents felt othered (Rice, 2021). Indeed, many adolescents reported feelings of "being 'excluded', 'outcast' and 'rejected' due to being different" (Ford, 2023, p. 151), being regarded as "strange" and being "teased", "insulted" or mocked" (Rice, 2021, p. 175; p. 192). One participant shared how this affected their view of school; "(points to letters on an alphabet display board; parent speaks out loud) I H-A-T-E-D I-T B-E-CA-U-S-E T-H-E-Y T-R-E-A-T-E-D-M-E L-I-K-E-A-N I-D-I-O-T" (Tresfaye et al., 2023, p. 1149).

Adolescents shared how teachers shaped their feelings of acceptance in the school environment. With some explaining they "... never felt fully accepted [by my teachers]." (Ford, 2023, p. 127), others shared that, "Some teachers just accept me for who I am, despite the sometimes trouble that I cause. And some, some just can't get over it." (Myers, 2012, p. 99). Yet other "… participants described their schools as 'inclusive' and their teachers as 'flexible', 'reasonable', 'supportive', and 'understanding' …". (Ford, 2023, p. 126).

Many adolescents were acutely aware of the social influence school had on them. One participant shared:

> School is important in determining how a person feels because it is where most of the people (outside their family) that a child knows are. Therefore, having a positive or negative experience of school can have a major impact on a child's wellbeing. (Rice, 2021, p. 225).

The Importance and Value of Social Connections. Adolescents' family and friendships were important in their sense of belonging and acceptance in which adolescents "always felt comfortable" (Samara, 2016, p. 203). The positive influence such relations had on adolescents' conceptualisation of autism was clear as they typically offered adolescents a sense of acceptance, lack of judgment and unconditional support (Rice, 2020). As such, for many adolescents, their family and friends provided them with a sense of belonging and understanding, countering negative societal views, with "no pressure to fit in" (Rice, 2020, p. 174).

Integrating Multiple Perspectives. Theme four relates to the process of integrating and evaluating a myriad of views, apparent facts and perceptions in society, as previously explored in themes 1-3, surrounding autism and as such the process of adolescents forming their own understanding and conceptualisations.

Autistic Individuals' Place and Status in Society. Others' understanding of autism was discussed frequently, with most adolescents feeling that more awareness of autism was needed. Adolescents highlighted that "…people just assume a lot about me if they hear the word, autism." (Alexander & Bissaker, 2023, p. 12). Others' assumptions made adolescents feel negatively judged, "'Oh, he's autistic. It's not normal.' But then if someone regular that doesn't have autism's doing it, they're like, 'Oh, it's regular.'" (Berkovits et al., 2020, p. 836). For many adolescents, the associated stigma and discrimination experienced, related to being autistic, led to being bullied or teased by peers (Berkovits et al., 2020; Cridland et al., 2015; Ford, 2023; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Enacted stigma made adolescents feel as though they were "worth less than other people." (Rice, 2021, p. 232) and seen as "…the weird kid with autism". (Morgan, 2023, p. 187).

Adolescents also spoke about how teachers and wider professionals could make them feel inferior and patronised (Mogenson & Mason, 2015). Such experiences led adolescents to feel "isolated and misunderstood" (Alexander & Bissaker, 2023, p. 11). Some adolescents underwent "…intense, early intervention…" (Mogenson & Mason, 2015; p. 86) following their autism diagnosis, which highlighted differences "outside the norm" and a sense of needing to change themselves. Adolescents described feeling othered and infantised, "I don't particularly like being autistic that much, because it makes certain people baby me." (Kofke, 2019, p. 132) and not feeling like they belonged, as others "… think you're different from everyone else" (Alexander & Bissaker, 2023, p. 8).

For many adolescents, feeling this need to change and to fit in with society led to masking and concealment, "Like you have to put on a front so people accept you but that front like becomes like that personality that you're showing can be completely different to your normal personality, who you really are." (Rice, 2021, p. 176). "I do not want people to know who don't need to because I don't want people to think of me any different or treat me any different." (Rice, 2021, p. 180).

Some adolescents actively challenged negative perceptions, views and stereotypes,"…they're making fun of it, and I'll say 'look you're not using it correctly, please stop taking fun of it." (Anilmis, 2018, p. 115). Another adolescent shared "[T]here is no definite diagnosis for any case of borderline autism, autism, Asperger's, ADD/ADHD…we are all different." (Mogensen & Mason, 2015, p. 89) This sentiment was echoed by others, "You're more than just what the stereotypes say." (Ford, 2023, p. 130).

Autistic Community. Adolescents highlighted the importance of knowing and interacting with other autistic people as it allowed them to know they were not "alone" (Samara, 2016, p. 199) and that others had similar experiences (Stevenson et al., 2016). This speaks to the 'double empathy problem' (Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2022) in which autistic and non-autistic individuals possess varying outlooks and conceptual understandings and as such both experience difficulties in mutual understanding during social interactions. Adolescents highlighted a desire to learn about other autistic adults' experiences and find individuals who understood them (Kofke, 2019) and realising that "There are lots of people just like me." (Stevenson et al., 2016, p. 228).

Affiliation with other autistic individuals, either directly or indirectly, offered adolescents opportunities to explore their and other's embodied experience of autism. As such, being part of or linked to the wider autistic community allowed adolescents to view autism differently based on the embodied experience of autistic individuals, including their own personal experiences. For some, this allowed them to counter stereotypical, reductive societal narratives (Anilmis, 2018; Ford, 2023; King et al., 2019; Rice, 2021). By talking about autism, adolescents shared that it allows them to not "…be ashamed of it, [as] It's just your autism" (Stevenson et al., 2016).

Navigating Intersectionality and Acculturation. Theme five reflects autistic adolescents navigating how autism forms their identity, a process called acculturation.

Advocacy, Balancing Needs and Rights. Whether adolescents regarded autism as a disability and in turn, themselves as disabled varied. Whilst some did not conceptualise autism as a disability (Kofke, 2019), others discussed being "... mentally disabled, well partly mentally disabled." (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008, p. 31), having "special needs", (King et al., 2019, p. 231) "support needs"

(Stevenson et al., 2016, p. 220) or “different difficulties” (Winstone et al., 2014, p. 200) explaining that “…autism is such an invisible disability” (Stevenson et al., 2022, p. 222).

Disability was often associated with negative connotations, such as being treated differently, being “babied” (Kofke, 2019, p. 132) and “…a disability that can hold you back.” (Morgan, 2023, p. 188). Linked with the notion of autism being a disability was the idea that adolescents required support and that they were a “person with support needs” (Morgan, 2023, p. 188). Whilst some adolescents regarded the support they received as appropriate (Ford, 2023; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008) asking for help and being seen to receive additional school support was often evaluated negatively. Participants spoke about not asking for help in case they got told off by teachers and were seen as “not listening” (Rice, 2021, p. 218). Adolescents shared that the visibility of school support heightened their sense of difference (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008) and risked being mocked by peers for being an “annoying teacher’s pet” or a “try hard.” (Rice, 2021, p. 220). As such, whilst adolescents shared a sense of difference, for many adolescents there was an intense wish not to be *treated* or *seen* differently.

Considerations for Future Self. Across studies, adolescents held diverse understandings of autism and thus notions of what being autistic may mean for their future (Myers, 2012). Many adolescents’ conceptualisation of autism affected their outlook, with a sense that their future may be different from non-autistic people (Anilmis, 2018). Considerations included concerns over education and career prospects, “I’m pretty sure that most companies aren’t going to hire an autistic kid over someone who has a fully regular mental capacity” (Berkovits et al., 2020, p. 836), to relationships and independence skills, such as driving (Teysfaye et al., 2023). Some adolescents shared a sense of optimism and hope, including future education and career ambitions (Samra, 2016) and employment opportunities, “…companies will want me because I’ve got Asperger’s, and it’s like a special skill [technology jobs].” (Anilmis, 2018, p. 114). Adolescents wanted a successful and good future for themselves, in which they had a sense of purpose (Baines, 2012). Future considerations were therefore often in the context of the societal views regarding autism.

Navigating a Multifaceted Identity. Adolescents mostly identified with autism or saw it as an intrinsic part of their identity (Morgan, 2023; Rice, 2021; Trew, 2024), explaining that it was something they "...wouldn't change … because it's who I am." (Tesfaye et al., 2023, p. 1147). For some, autism was core to their being, sharing, "It's okay that I have AS, otherwise I wouldn't be who I am." (Cridland et al., 2015, p. 359). However, for some adolescents, their autism identity was less secure, "sometimes I identify with being an autistic person. that's part of who i am. "i am lucy and i'm autistic". sometimes it's "i'm lucy and i happen to have autism." sometimes it's both. it depends on the situation." (Trew, 2024, p. 12).

Adolescents discussed a range of identity markers, including; being a student (Rice, 2021) their sexuality (Kofke, 2019), ethnicity "…every black kid in my year they have pretty much got some street credibility in some sort of way and they get all the girls and what not and then there is just me…" (Samra, 2016, p. 197), physical characteristics (Myers, 2012; Winstone et al., 2014), their relationships with others (King et al, 2019; Samra, 2016), interests (Ford, 2023; King et al., 2019), "I don't really think about autism that much. I'm mostly thinking about things like school and politics." (Anilmis, 2028, p. 107), abilities (Kofke, 2019; Rice, 2021) and personal qualities (Ford, 2023; Kofke, 2019; Rice, 2021). For example, one adolescent described themselves as "Funny … sometimes kind, happy most of the time." (Winstone et al., 2014, p. 195). Thus, as Tesfaye and colleagues (2023) also concluded, autistic adolescents, like all adolescents have a range of interests, social relationships and personal qualities that all contribute to a multifaceted, ever-evolving identity, that is continually being explored and established, especially during these formative years.

Lived experience, in particular the school environment shaped how adolescents viewed themselves (Mogensen & Mason, 2015; Rice, 2021; Samra, 2016). Adolescents shared a desire to be their true, authentic selves, through a process of self-actualisation, and yet were conscious of how that may be received explaining "…I don't think the world is ready to be understanding and supportive." (Morgan, 2023, p. 188). For many, maturation brought benefits as "…priorities changed with age, and they reported they thought less about their diagnosis over time: I've gone past the autism age. I don't really think about autism that much." (Anilmis, 2018, p. 107).

Young People as Complex, Unique, Free Agents

Within the reviewed studies, adolescents demonstrated a clear sense of self-awareness and introspection, highlighted by a breadth and depth of emotions. Additionally, adolescents held their own world views which often developed over time. For many adolescents, they sought to foreground their strengths and abilities as opposed to being defined by perceived weaknesses or deficits. Adolescents wanted to prove others wrong and demonstrate their capabilities, "I want to show people who said 'oh, he can't do it because he's got autism' I wanna show them that you can." (Stevenson, 2016, p. 226). As such, adolescents constructed their individual identity, often reclaiming and redefining the term autism, to reflect their aspirations, individuality, attributes and qualities, in turn disarming stigmatising stereotypes, "I think a lot of people are like ah syndrome, it's a syndrome, or disorder (. . .) Or you know, and we're like 'chill man'" (Morgan, 2023, p. 187).

As such, reviewed studies depicted a picture of personal growth and transformation with adolescents gaining a sense of who they were as complex, unique, free agents, who did not need to meet others' expectations (Samara, 2016). Thus, there was a shift from viewing autism through the deficit lens prevalent in society to one that adolescents themselves individually defined, based on their own experiences and that of others in the autistic community. The forging of such counternarratives was articulately encapsulated by one adolescent, "I realise now that every single person in the world is different. Normal is just a word and it's irrelevant to us." (Stevenson, 2016, p. 221).

Discussion

This systematic review sought to synthesise qualitative research to explore the question, ‘How do adolescents, who identify as autistic, conceptualise autism?’. Thematic synthesis of 19 papers highlighted the heterogeneity of views amongst autistic adolescents, reflecting unique understandings born from equally unique experiences. Across the included studies, adolescents shared their sense of difference, encompassing good, bad and neutral evaluations. Often such views were conflicting, perhaps reflecting adolescents’ navigation of internalised stigma and integrating an often societally stigmatised identity.

Adolescence is a significant period of identity formation in which adolescents re-examine aspects of their identity formed in childhood and explore a range of new possibilities (Branje et al., 2021). As highlighted in the current review, adolescents navigate numerous identity markers such as sexuality, gender, ethnicity, student and interpersonal roles with friends and family. Autistic adolescents must also navigate their autistic identity, which can be regarded as a social identity in which shared characteristics with members of groups they belong to are then incorporated into the individual’s self-concept (Cooper et al., 2017).

With the support of positive narratives, often from family and friends, adolescents demonstrated a desire and drive to counter historical reductive, deficit-based narratives, surrounding autism. Coupled with maturation and greater self-awareness, being part of the autistic community and sharing experiences provided adolescents with the confidence to forge their own counternarrative, based on embodied experience and understanding. Thereby adolescents stepped into the role of epistemic agents with valid and valuable expertise regarding their lives and identity, with their embodied experience shaping the conceptualisation of autism.

Adolescents described unique qualities they felt autism afforded them and the positive role it had in their lives, which aligns with those discussed by autistic adults in Russell and colleagues’ (2019) study. For instance, the ability to concentrate and focus more deeply and for longer periods of time. Coupled with good memory, this enabled them to form passions and great interests, which in turn created depth of knowledge and expertise. Many adolescents spoke of having a strong drive and sense of self associated with autism. Adolescents also shared being empathetic and having a strong awareness of others' affective state. The sense of being differentiated and liberated from traditionalism was another positive aspect associated with autism. Many adolescents also spoke about having creative thinking processes, which enabled them to have novel, often innovative approaches to problems and situations and hence "…look at the world in a different way … a bit like what an artist would look at it, or a film director, and it's a really interesting way like, to see it from my eyes." (Stevenson et al., 2016, p. 219).

Implications for Practitioners

Drawing upon minority stress theory, autistic adolescents' conceptualisation of autism and how this relates to social, psychological, and structural factors have potential links to their identity and wellbeing. Indeed, autistic adolescents experience heightened rates of mental health difficulties. In line with the social model of disability and as mentioned by many of the adolescents in the reviewed studies, there is the need to focus on social interventions which provide education about autism and thus understanding amongst the wider population. Universal programmes in schools and colleges, with a focus on understanding autism and disability and embracing diversity, have been found to be effective strategies to foster positive impressions and reduce discriminatory attitudes (Salinger, 2020; Sasson & Morrison, 2019). For example, Learning About Neurodiversity at School (LEANS) (Alcorn et al., 2022), an education programme co-developed with teachers, neurodivergent adults and the public, has been found to foster school children's, aged between 8 – 11 years, understanding, including terminology, and perception of neurodiversity and neurodivergence, which cultivated greater positive, accepting attitudes to neurodiversity and neurodivergence (Alcorn et al., 2024). It is important that programme material draws upon first-hand accounts from autistic individuals and reflects embodied autistic experiences. Barrett (2006) found that incorporating first-hand accounts into training delivered to psychologists and teachers resulted in qualitatively different kinds of conversations and meaning-making amongst attendees and emphasised the importance of quality relationships with autistic children over and above apparent characteristics, thus humanising and contextualising what it means to be autistic.

For autistic young people, emerging evidence suggests that positive psychoeducational programmes, which seek to educate in a neuro-affirming way can support knowledge about autism, including awareness of unique strengths and difficulties (Gordon et al., 2015) and can promote a sense of hope, pride and self-acceptance (Prodromakis, 2024). Psychoeducational programmes can be co-facilitated by experts by experience and thus reflect first-hand, embodied accounts of autism. Offering programmes in a group format allows individuals to meet others with similar experiences and may facilitate new supportive social connections (Beresford & Mukherjee, 2023). Indeed, adolescents in the reviewed studies highlighted the importance of knowing other autistic adolescents.

Group-based psychoeducational programmes may not be practical or preferable for some individuals. Recent findings have also shown the benefit of pre-recorded, online psychoeducational programmes, presented via the perspective of autistic lived experience to have a range of beneficial outcomes for autistic children, including self-understanding, sense of belonging and their emergent autistic identity, following a six-week programme (Mullally et al., 2024).

In line with social identity theory and social categorisation, Cooper and colleagues (2023) found that adolescents, aged between 15 – 22 years, who felt greater connection with other autistic individuals had higher psychological wellbeing. This points to the importance of young people connecting with other autistic individuals in the process of developing positive autism social identification. Fostering connections via groups and clubs for autistic adolescents can enable adolescents to freely explore and embrace their autistic identities with others, including via online platforms (Ringland, 2019).

Many of the adolescents in the current systematic review discussed uncertainty about the future which they associated with being autistic. This was often associated with future career prospects. Despite the vast majority of working-age autistic adults wanting to work, unemployment levels amongst autistic adults in the UK are very high, with only around 30% in employment, (Department for Work and Pensions, 2024; Office for National Statistics, 2022). Indeed, autistic adults and their parents identified work and jobs as key research priority areas (Pellicano et al., 2014). Branje and colleagues' (2021) review of the development of adolescents' identity highlights that adolescents who have greater certainty about themselves and clearer future directions have been found to have better outcomes across a range of domains whereas continued identity uncertainty can leave adolescents with feelings of despair and adopting less adaptive coping mechanisms. Thus, as well as offering adolescents safe, supportive environments to explore their identity, positive, aspirational messaging about future life outcomes is important. In schools and colleges, this could take the form of robust and tailored careers advice which takes a possibility-oriented view focussing on the individual's strengths, interests and hopes, alongside identifying facilitating environments that allow the individual to flourish (Bölte, 2021).

Strengths and Limitations

The current review offers insight into the complex, often interconnected factors that shape how autistic adolescents conceptualise autism and the potential consequences for self-identity and wellbeing. By focusing on how autistic adolescents conceptualise autism, it provides a platform for alternative narratives of autism, that values adolescents as experts in their own lives and thus epistemic agents. By centering adolescents' voices throughout, this review in turn seeks to counter epistemic injustices, which have been prevalent in society and research (Catala et al., 2021).

The inductive nature of analysis enabled the synthesis of rich data with a range of interconnected themes. However, such process is inevitably limited by the interpretation and participant quotes presented by the original authors of the included studies. So, whilst the voices of

220 autistic adolescents were represented, indicating diverse conceptualisations of autism, such individuals will by no means be reflective of all autistic adolescents. As Samra (2016) discusses, for some autistic adolescents, autism does not form a strong part of their identity and thus such individuals are perhaps less inclined to take part in research seeking the views of autistic individuals. Furthermore, despite actively including studies in which self-identification was permitted, thirteen of the nineteen studies recruited only individuals with a formal diagnosis, four studies did not specifically clarify whether adolescents required a diagnosis, and two stated autism status was not checked or included self-identification. As such, findings draw largely on individuals who have received a formal diagnosis and potentially overlook self-identified autistic adolescents.

The use of databases Global Index Medicus and SciELO in the current study sought to incorporate findings from a range of non-western countries, however, all of the included studies were conducted in developed, Western countries and thus reflect a Westernised view of autism. Indeed, research indicates that views of and the conceptualisation of autism differ among various cultures around the world (Kim, 2012) and that the importance given to certain social behaviours, typically associated with autism in the West is not universal but rather influenced by many factors including culture (Perepa, 2013).

Given that the current review utilised a thematic synthesis approach, only the text within included studies pertaining to adolescents' views was analysed. Many of the included studies used a range of approaches to elicit adolescents' views, from drawings, photographs and statement ordering tasks. As such, the current analysis only reflects adolescents who engaged in interviews, which may not align with the views and experiences of individuals who communicate by means other than verbal. Future reviews could therefore look to synthesise data from a range of data collection methods.

It is a contentious debate within academia, as to what constitutes 'quality' in qualitative research, including how to judge the rigour and validity of evidence and how synthesis studies with varying epistemological perspectives (Carroll & Booth, 2015; Garside, 2014; Long et al., 2020) and yet increasingly qualitive synthesis reviews are shaping policy and drawn upon to make evidence-based decisions. In the current synthesis review, the CASP checklist, for qualitative research (2023) was used. Previous versions of the CASP tool have been found to be a relatively good measure of transparency around research practice and reporting, yet less applicable in ascertaining aspects of design and conduct (Long et al., 2020). Whilst the use of a quality assessment is often a necessity it does not necessarily allow for studies to be regarded as high or low quality and can often relate to quality of reporting as opposed to methodology (Long et al., 2020). Indeed, of the 19 included studies 12 did not sufficiently take into account the relationship between researchers and participants, which is problematic and at odds with a social constructionist framework.

Conclusion

Whilst autism is but one word, it is clear to see it carries a multitude of assumptions and understandings, in society, amongst practitioners, researchers and notably amongst autistic individuals. Despite decades of research, previous research has often overlooked the voices of those with primary knowledge and experience. The current review sought to highlight how autism is conceptualised by adolescents who identify as autistic and thus highlight the voices of those with embodied experience. The voices of 220 adolescents in the current review depicted a myriad of views, evaluations and conceptualisations, reflecting the sheer diversity of individual experiences of those within the autistic community. Adolescents showed a desire and drive to counter historical reductive, deficit-based narratives, surrounding autism and forge their own counternarrative, based on embodied experience and understanding. As such autistic adolescents can and should be regarded as key knowledge holders and thus knowledge makers. Whilst autistic adolescents conceptualise autism as a difference, they also celebrate their diversity as "… it would be boring if everyone was the same." (Stevenson et al., 2016, p. 221).

Chapter 3 “You are taught that it's kind of quite a narrow box, and I think that made it more of a fun box to expand on”: Autistic, Gender Diverse Adolescents’ Experiences of Gender Stereotypes

Abstract

Stereotypes and stigma exist in relation to autism, across society, research and practice. One such area is the gendered-stereotypes surrounding autism on an account of it being viewed as a male-centric phenomenon. Simultaneously, research indicates higher prevalence rates of autistic adolescents identifying as gender diverse than neurotypical adolescents. Findings also suggest that autistic gender diverse adolescents are at risk of being misunderstood in terms of their gender and gender needs. The current study seeks to advocate the voice and experiences of autistic, gender diverse adolescents, specifically exploring the gender stereotypes autistic, gender diverse adolescents experience, how gender stereotypes affect their sense of identity and what enables adolescents to express their authentic identity. Eleven adolescents, aged between 16 – 25 years old shared their views and expertise of navigating gender stereotypes through semi-structured interviews. Three themes were developed from the data via reflexive thematic analysis: Pressures to Conform - “you are taught that it's kind of quite a narrow box”, Questioning the Status Quo - “oh everyone else is in these boxes and I've never really been in one” and Self Identification and Reconceptualisation - “a fun box to expand on”. Implications of these findings concerning how educational practitioners, external support agencies and young people can address gender rights and equality across a range of settings is discussed.

Introduction

Describing autism is far from straightforward, with a plethora of, often opposing, views and theories prevalent, across time (Evans, 2013; Happé & Frith; 2020), the field of autism research and across different cultures (Kim, 2012). The dominant medical objectivist model conceptualises autism as a ‘developmental disorder’ typified by deficits across a myriad of domains. Such narratives prevail in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (APA, 2013), in which autism is characterised by deficits in social communication and social interaction along with the presence of restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour or interests, often referred to as a "triad of impairments" (van Wijngaarden-Cremers et al., 2014). To reflect the sheer heterogeneity found, individuals have been described as being on the autistic "spectrum" (Lai et al., 2013). Different ways of understanding autism convey different degrees of stigma. Whilst there has been a shift towards the social constructionist model of neurodivergence, which draws upon a social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006; 2017) including the proposed 'double empathy problem' (Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2022), a range of stigmatised views and perceptions prevail in society. Stereotypical conceptualisations of autism and therefore autistic people are often regarded negatively by society (Wood & Freeth, 2016) which can lead to autistic individuals being regarded as 'less than' (Cage et al., 2019).

Autistic individuals are therefore subject to a range of stigma and stereotypes, and in turn experience minority stress (Botha & Frost, 2020). In Botha and colleagues' (2022) study, autistic adults recounted frequent, damaging experiences of stigma and the ways they navigated this varied from reframing, reclaiming language, and the considered use of concealment and disclosure. Participants reported various stereotypes associated with autism, including: autism as a gendered phenomenon, violence, and Whiteness, with one participant noting, "A lot of the time autism is associated with cis, het, white males" (p. 437).

Prominent theories have arguably encouraged a gendered understanding of autism. For example, the 'extreme male brain theory', which proposes that autism represents an "extreme of the normal male profile" (Baron-Cohen, 2002, p. 248), highlighting apparent sex differences with females showing superior empathising and males demonstrating superior systemising. Not only does the theory exacerbate stereotypical views of males and females, but it may promote systematic discrimination against autistic individuals who are not male, by implying that autism is an inherently male-centric phenomenon (Krahn & Fenton, 2012). Furthermore, gendered stereotypes surrounding autism may contribute to a range of negative consequences including; perpetuating gender biases, misconceptions amongst the general population (Brickhill et al., 2023; Botha et al., 2022), gender biases in autism research, including a lack of female representation (Pellicano et al., 2014), conceptualisation (Shefcyk, 2015) and diagnostic gender biases (Dean et al., 2017; Haney, 2016; Loomes et al., 2017).

Women who have received an autism diagnosis in late adolescence or early adulthood have highlighted experiences of: trying to ‘fit in’ through a range of strategies, including social mimicry and masking, autism related difficulties being misunderstood or dismissed by professionals and conflict between autism and pressures to adhere to notions and expectations surrounding traditional femininity (Bargiela et al., 2016). Shefcyk (2015) discusses such gender divisions in the field of autism, highlighting that autistic females are often “twice excluded: once from the neurotypical female population, and once again from the ASD community.” (p. 132) and calls for further research concerning autistic females.

Proponents of the ‘female autism phenotype’ suggest that the presentation of autism in females can be qualitatively different to male-based conceptualisations of autism (Hiller et al., 2014; Lai et al., 2015). A core aspect is the concept of “camouflaging” in which individuals mask or adopt compensatory strategies, such as social mimicry of gender-normative behaviours, to prevent others noticing traits and behaviours associated with autism (Bargiela et al., 2016; Hull et al., 2017a; Lai et al., 2015). Additionally, findings suggest that female children demonstrated fewer behaviours deemed as repetitive or restricted, including lining up or sorting behaviour, which is often associated with autistic males (Hiller et al., 2014). Differences in presentation may explain the gender discrepancies in identification and diagnoses rates, as diagnostic testing has traditionally been developed with male samples (Allely et al., 2019; Hiller et al., 2014; Hull et al., 2017b; Lai et al., 2015). For instance, the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (Lord et al., 2001), the Autism Diagnostic Interview-Revised (Rutter et al., 2003), the Autism Spectrum Quotient (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001) and the Social Communication Questionnaire (Rutter et al., 2010) all widely used diagnostic tools were developed using primarily male samples (Rea et al., 2022). Sex differences may contribute to diagnostic disparities and the under detection of females. Whitlock and colleagues (2020) highlight that the decision making of primary school staff, who are often key gatekeepers for autism referral and thus assessment, may contribute to such diagnostic disparities. Their findings from a sample of 289 primary school educational staff, who were presented with a range of vignettes depicting fictional children, indicated that school staff were more likely to consider autism when children were depicted as male rather than female. Furthermore, participants were more likely to suggest the depicted child may be autistic when the presentation aligned with the traditional male phenotype as opposed to the ‘female autism phenotype’. As such, educators were less likely to seek additional support for female children in comparison to male children, which may contribute to autism being under-recognised amongst females.

Whilst the female autism phenotype may support outcomes for females, taking steps towards inclusivity by challenging the male-gendered discourse around autism and address often male-biased diagnostic criteria and assessment tools, it risks perpetuating a binary, cisnormative perspective of gender. As Moore and colleagues (2022) highlighted in their systematic review and metasynthesis, the conceptualisation of ‘masking’ can other autistic females, suggesting they are the only ones to perform femininity. Moore and colleagues (2022) also note that individuals’ account of ‘masking’ echoes stereotypical gendered expectations of females and constructions of femininity in society such as ensuring “…I’m always perfect for everyone” (Tierney et al., 2016, p. 79).

Additionally, questions arise as to how the ‘female autism phenotype’ fits non-binary conceptualisations of gender and in turn gender diverse autistic individuals. Thus, the ‘female autism phenotype’ may overlook and even inadvertently discriminate against a substantial minority of autistic individuals who do not identify as cis (Cooper et al., 2018; Dewinter et al., 2017; Strang et al., 2018).

Gender Diversity and Autism

In the 2021 UK Census, 0.5% of respondents, over the age of 16 in England and Wales, indicated that their gender identity was incongruent to their sex assigned at birth, although 6.0% of individuals did not answer this question and thus rates may be higher (Office for National Statistics, 2023). Zhang and colleagues' (2020), systematic review suggests that between 2.5%–8.4% of children and adolescents, indicate incongruence between their gender identity and assigned sex at birth, with clear upward trends in comparison to previous generations.

Emerging research is finding greater rates of gender diversity amongst autistic populations in comparison to non-autistic individuals (Stagg & Vincent, 2019). Bonazzi and colleagues' (2025) systematic review found that of studies examined with autistic participants (adults, adolescents and children), 7.37% identified as gender diverse. Further analysis indicated higher prevalence amongst individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) (14.54%) compared with individuals assigned male at birth (AMAB) (8.15%). Analysis of survey data from 675 adolescents and adults registered on the Netherlands Autism Register found that up to 22% of individuals AFAB and 8% of individuals AMAB, reported to relate to a gender identity that was not wholly congruent with their assigned sex at birth (Dewinter et al., 2017). Research also indicates increased rates of gender diversity amongst autistic children, aged between 10 - 13 years old, based on both self- and parent-report (Corbett et al., 2023).

Drawing upon intersectionality, performativity and gender hegemony, a recent systematic review, which examined the intersection of autism and gender highlighted the manner in which dominant autism discourses, such as the 'extreme male brain' (Baron-Cohen, 2002) and the 'female autism phenotype' (Allely, 2019; Hiller et al., 2014; Hull et al., 2017a,b; Lai et al., 2015) restricted gender identities. Moore and colleagues' (2022) qualitative systematic metanalysis, which comprised of a sample of autistic adults who were predominantly cisgender female or gender diverse, suggest that participants felt gendered autistic identities were regarded as subordinate and 'other' by medical professionals and family. Furthermore, gendered autism narratives, such as the ‘extreme male brain’ and female ‘masking’ influenced individuals’ sense of gender identities, often reinforcing gender essentialism, with biologically defined conceptualisations of ‘male’ and ‘female’. A final theme reflected the benefit of communities of identity, such as autistic/neurodiverse and/or LGBT+ communities in providing a sense of belonging, raising awareness of oppressive societal narratives and empowering resistance to normative expectations.

Autistic individuals are subject to a range of negative stigma and stereotypes (Wood & Freeth, 2016) and in turn experience minority stress (Botha & Frost, 2020). Gender diverse, autistic individuals have dual marginalised identities and therefore face double discrimination on account of cisnormative, neurotypical expectations that are embedded in societal practices, systems and indeed knowledge production. Cisnormativity is the assumption that individuals identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, with gender and sex congruence positioned as the ‘norm’, resulting in privileges for cis individuals which are embedded in societal structures and systems (Robinson, 2022; Worthen, 2016). Those within such systems are likely to be influenced by cisnormative biases which can result in trans children being regarded as deviant, with trans identity seen as problematic and pathological and in turn their rights denied (Horton, 2023). As Butler (1988, p. 522) highlights, “those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished”.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of interviews with twenty-one autistic adults regarding their experience of incongruence between their gender identity and sex assigned at birth, showed that participants experienced distress on account of living in societies not always accepting of gender and neurodiversity (Cooper et al., 2022). In interviews with autistic adults experiencing gender dysphoria, i.e., distress associated with incongruence between experienced or expressed gender and gender assigned at birth, participants shared that “gender-loaded stereotypes” (p. 2649) typically linked with autism, led a participant who was assigned female at birth to question if they had a ‘male brain’. Furthermore, individuals felt that their gender experiences and identity were questioned and invalidated by others on account of being autistic (Coleman-Smith et al., 2020; Strang et al., 2018).

In 2014, the Department of Health's 'Think Autism' programme highlighted that professionals, services and communities can all too often fail to look beyond an individual's autism label and thus key aspects of identity, such as sexuality, gender and race are not always considered. Indeed, transgender or non-binary autistic adults, with first-hand experiences of accessing, or trying to access, gender identity health care, spoke of healthcare professionals' limited knowledge and understanding about the intersection between gender identity and autism and the barriers this caused (Bruce et al., 2023).

In their narrative review, Mallipeddi and VanDaalen (2022) call for researchers to explore how intersectionality and social influences affect autistic individuals, with particular focus on exploring racial, gender and sexuality minority group experiences within the autistic community. Indeed, Strang and colleagues' (2018) study revealed many of the 22 autistic, gender diverse adolescents (aged 12-20) discussed challenges in verbalising and self-advocating their gender identity. Universal examples of self-advocacy include informing and being informed, using media, supporting each other, speaking up, with specific approaches adopted by autistic self-advocates comprising of telling people what autism is (what it is not), defending rights, starting or signing petitions, myth-busting about autism, helping autistic peers, raising public awareness and being active on social media (Petri et al., 2020).

Given the ever-evolving nature of gender, as a societal construct, there is the need to understand the views and experiences of adolescents in light of the current societal context. A recent generational comparison study of participants aged between 16-73 years, indicated that younger generational cohorts possess more varied gender identities (Puckett et al., 2022). Bragg and colleagues' (2018) conclude that adolescents are challenging the status quo and forming empowered reconceptualisations of gender. However, autistic gender diverse adolescents have spoken of their affirmed gender being questioned or doubted by others on account of being autistic, sharing; “They viewed it as an obsession...” (Strang et al., 2018, p. 4049).

Recently, such misconceptions and cisnormative bias amongst professionals have been highlighted in ‘The Cass Review’ (Horton, 2024). Commissioned by the National Health Service, ‘The Cass Review’ (Cass, 2024) set out to provide service recommendations for children and young people “exploring their gender identity or experiencing gender incongruence” (NHS, n.d.). Researchers have critiqued the report, noting a number of methodological flaws and unsubstantiated claims (Horton, 2024; Grijseels, 2024; Noone et al., 2025). Concerns have also been raised in relation to overt prejudice, cisnormativity bias, pathologisation, as well as dismissal and belittling of trans identities (Horton, 2024). Indeed, one of The Cass Review’s interim reports, calls for research to explore factors that cause a trans identity, positioning this within the context of ‘aetiology’ in which “Clinicians and scientists try to work out the cause of the condition or the underlying physical or biological basis.” (Cass, 2022, p. 55). Similarly, in order to bestow upon the reader the manner in which clinical services are typically developed, Cass (2022) uses the example of Autism explaining that it is a “clinical diagnosis…[which entails]…performing standardised assessments on the child or young person” (p.102) before going on to discuss the challenges of accessing “target treatment” (p. 104).

This deficit, pathologised approach positions both gender diversity and autism as something that needs to be ‘fixed’. One young person, who took part in a focus group as part of The Cass Review process, shared how they wanted support services to be “a place that feels like it’s there to support you rather than “fix” you.” (The Cass Review, n.d., p. 24). Furthermore, this report highlighted individuals concerns around differential diagnosis, that is, attributing distress to another condition as opposed to factors related to gender identity, for worry that clinicians will use this to “excuse away” how young people feel (The Cass Review, n.d., p. 14). Indeed, The Cass Review mentions that young people feel that health professionals may discredit their gender identity on account of neurodiversity. Ashley (2024) a neurodivergent academic, critiques the ‘insidious mobilisation' of neurodivergence outlined in The Cass Review which undermines transgender peoples' agency by suggesting experiences "…may be associated with and influenced by other factors, including experiences of neurodiversity [sic] and trauma." (Cass, 2024, p. 120). Indeed, as discussed by Toft (2023), research has been focused on trying to explain why higher prevalences of LGBT + identities occur amongst autistic people and fails to engage with autistic people themselves. Whilst The Cass Review includes some quotes from children and young people, these are minimal. As Horton (2024) points out, literature on those with lived experience is not cited by The Cass Review and thus argues that the report prioritises cis professionals' views.

Therefore, autistic gender minority adolescents are at risk of being misunderstood, disbelieved and discredited in terms of their gender and gender needs. To truly explore identity and self-advocacy amongst gender diverse, autistic adolescents, young people themselves must be the primary source of knowledge and respected as the experts of their own lives (Langsted, 1994; Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Based on the current literature there is a need for exploratory research that seeks to advocate the voice and experiences of autistic, gender diverse adolescents. The current study explores the gender stereotypes autistic, gender diverse adolescents experience in a society with typically cisnormative expectations, with a specific focus on the following research questions:

- How do adolescents, who identify as autistic and gender diverse, conceptualise gender stereotypes?
- How have adolescents, who identify as autistic and gender diverse, experienced gender stereotypes?
- How do gender stereotypes influence adolescents', who identify as gender diverse and autistic, sense of identity?
- What do adolescents, who identify as autistic and gender diverse, feel enables them to develop an authentic sense of self?

Method

Design

A flexible, qualitative approach was used to explore the complexity and meanings of naturally occurring phenomena, such as feelings, thoughts and experiences of adolescents, who identify as autistic and gender diverse (Widodo, 2014). In an endeavour to promote the voice of autistic, gender diverse adolescents, participants were invited to decide the approach to share their views, including written communication, interviews or focus groups.

Reflexivity, Epistemology and Ontology

The researcher. Throughout the research process, I was conscious of my positionality as an outsider, as a non-autistic cis female. I am aware that my approach to this research is through a feminist, social justice perspective and thus inherently interpretative based on my own assumptions and biases, associated with my own cisgender lens.

Epistemology and Ontology. To explore participants' lived experience, I took a social constructionist epistemological position, considering knowledge as something that is socially constructed through human interaction with their cultural and contextual surroundings (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Burr, 2015). In line with epistemological principles of constructionist research, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed qualitative data about participants' experiences to be captured, thus enabling me to engage in inductive analysis, constructing 'bottom-up' themes (Levers, 2013).

Participants and Recruitment. Eleven participants who self-identified as autistic and gender diverse were recruited via purposive sampling, through relevant charities and organisations, secondary schools and colleges. Recruitment also utilised Prolific (www.prolific.com) [February – March 2025]. Individuals were aged between 16 and 25 years old (mean age of 22 years). Of the 11 participants, nine identified as White British, one identified as White British and Black African and one individual identified as Black. See Table 4 for full details of participant demographic information.

Table 4

Participant Demographic Information

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Pronouns	Autism Language Preference
Emily*	17	White British	Demi-girl	She/They	I prefer to be referred to as an autistic person
May	21	White British and Black African	Non-binary	They/Them	I am an autistic person
Gerti	23	White/British	Non-binary	He/They	I am autistic
Angel	22	White - British	Gender Fluid	They/Them	I am neurodivergent - diagnosed ADHD, self-diagnosed Autism
Ash	25	White British	Nonbinary	She/They	I am autistic
Sosa	23	Black	Nonbinary/ Genderfluid	They/He	I am autistic
Starlight	24	White British	Genderqueer Lesbian	She/He/They	I'm Autistic/I am an Autistic person
Venus	20	White British	Non-Binary	They/Them	I am autistic
Billy	22	White British	Non-binary	They/Them	I am autistic
Cleo	24	White British	Female/non-binary/fluid	She/They	I am neurodivergent
Bailey*	16	White/British	Unsure	They/She	I am autistic

Note. Identity labels are the exact wording of participants.

Participants denoted by an asterisk (*) were recruited via charities, organisations and education settings. As such, only these participants were invited to contribute to the synthesised member checking. Based on pronoun preferences shared, the use of the pronoun ‘they’ was used in the current paper for most participants. As Emily shared, she was trans during the interview, the decision was to use the pronoun ‘she’ when referring to Emily.

Procedure

A semi-structured interview topic guide developed for the study by the research team was used, along with secondary prompts and summarising to encourage elaboration (Roulston & Choi, 2018; Tong et al., 2007) (see Appendix B). In line with the researcher's social constructionist epistemology, semi-structured interviews allow for in depth exploration of individual participants' thoughts of an identified topic whilst also allowing flexibility and adaptability enabling a natural, professional conversation in which information is shared and formed between individuals (Kvale, 1996; Ruslin et al., 2022). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Southampton's Ethics and Research Governance Committee. (91638.A2). Interviews were conducted and data were audio recorded and auto transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Interviews ranged from approximately 37 - 56 minutes, averaging at 47 minutes long. Using principles of attentive listening, the researcher reviewed and amended the auto-generated transcripts as necessary for accuracy and to become more familiar with the data (Widodo, 2014). NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023), a qualitative data management program, was used to manage and analyse the data.

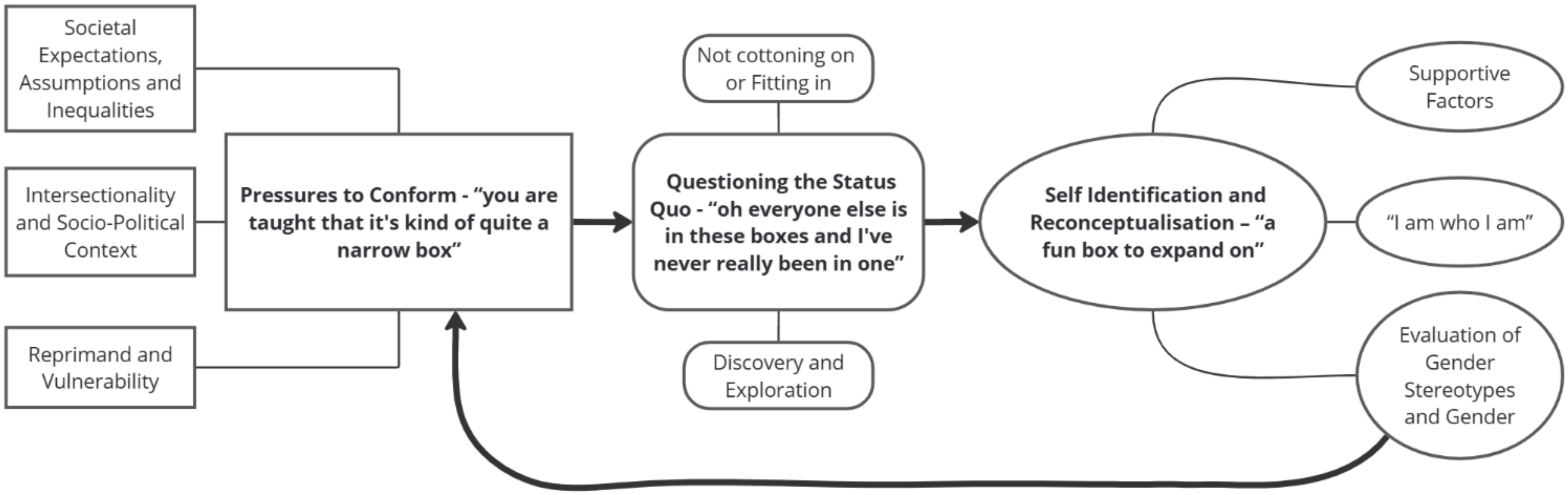
Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) reflexive six-phase guide to performing Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to shape analysis. Analysis was underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology (Burr, 2003), examining repeated patterns and shared meanings formed by social processes and interactions, to generate a cohesive interpretation of findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Reflexive TA was deemed suitable as it offers a rich and detailed account of the data, enabling the exploration of the views, perceptions and understandings of a particular group within the context of different discourses in society (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019; 2022).

Data was analysed inductively, without attempting to actively fit it into pre-determined codes or assumption's (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To improve transparency, rigour and credibility, I referred to Braun and Clarke's (2021) twenty question tool for evaluating TA. The first stage of analysis, Phase 1 involved repeated, active reading of transcripts and recording initial thoughts. Across all transcripts, an initial list of codes was produced. Through an iterative process, codes were expanded with additional codes generated and refined, to reflect the ongoing development of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were then collated to reflect shared concepts to create early themes and subthemes. Themes were refined and illustrative quotes selected. The active process of writing findings deemed the final stage of analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006; 2021), developed three main themes, represented by adolescents' quotes. Along with associated subthemes, these themes captured participants' narratives and experiences around gender stereotypes (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Thematic Map



Note. The changes in shapes, from left to right, and the arrow headed lines indicate the shift in participants' thoughts and views as encapsulated by the themes, from conforming to social norms (square boxes), questioning said norms (softened corners) to reconceptualising norms (ovals).

Themes

Pressures to Conform - "you are taught that it's kind of quite a narrow box"

Theme one reflects the range of gender stereotypes that exist in society and therefore the expectations, assumptions and inequalities that adolescents experience in relation to these. The theme also explores how other aspects of adolescents' lives, including other identity categories (such as autism and ethnicity) as well as school, family and politics shape their experience of gender stereotypes. Finally, it looks at the reprimands that adolescents experience, such as being bullied, or told off, for not adhering to gender stereotypes and the subsequent sense of fear and vulnerability this can create.

Societal Expectations, Assumptions and Inequalities. Adolescents shared their understanding of gender stereotypes as a set of "…widely held societal views about, what gender is, and also about like certain gender roles" (Billy). As such, adolescents spoke of the assumptions around gender and "…the expectations people have on you based on the gender, they've clocked you as yeah. And the way they expect that you're going to behave and move through the world and, like, interact with them…" (Starlight), including "… certain ways that you're supposed to behave or supposed to dress or supposed to think or feel." (Billy). Thus, adolescents regarded gender stereotypes as societal expectations that are "…placed onto [them]…" (Emily).

Adolescents identified an array of gender stereotype examples, with Bailey commenting "...there's plenty really, the list goes on and on and on." Such examples were prevalent from an early age including the sort of things boys and girls are thought to like, what they wear and how they are expected to behave "…toys that boys and girls are given that boys and girls are sold separately." (Angel), "… little boys like are louder or more rambunctious or whatever than little girls are." (Sosa), reflecting early socialisation of gender expectations. These expectations were also present in adulthood, with discussions around roles within the home, family and employment. Billy shared the assumption held that "…women are caring and more like, yeah, more like maternal figures that are more likely to be domestic …". Regarding employment, Venus said "…there's an expectation for certain genders to work in certain sectors." Therefore, adolescents thought that gender stereotypes

"…permeates into sort of everything. It permeates into how you talk, it permeates into what you wear, what you buy, what you do. I don't really think there's anything that isn't touched by gender stereotypes in our society." (Angel).

Adolescents discussed the binary nature of gender stereotypes, which placed expectations of men and women as occupying opposing qualities and behaviours, demonstrating the nature of polarity within binary gender rules prevalent in society. Ash explained, "…it's just kind of the overarching, expectation of man and woman. It's very much the dichotomy of men are good at some things, women are good at other things." These binary rules are also evident during childhood, "…when you're a child and it's very much just like blue is for boys, pink is for girls. These are just sort of the very binary rules of existing." (Sosa). Adolescents thus spoke of widely held expectations of males and females which are often taken for granted and unquestioned.

Hetero-cis-normative rules and expectations were regarded as restrictive and limiting by adolescents, including "…the way that we dress up little girls is ... kind of confining in a sense because it limits activities that they're socially allowed to do." (Starlight). Imposed expectations were based on adolescent's assigned sex at birth, with the assumption of congruent gender, causing adolescents to feel "…held back and kind of restricted…" (Gerti) and as such, "…more confined to dressing typically...as I was quote on quote 'born to'." (Emily). Thus, adolescents highlighted clear rules and expectations experienced from society based on their assigned sex at birth and the cisnormative societal lens which presumes one's sex and gender should align.

Such restrictions and societal enforcement of hetero-cis-normative rules were often associated with incidences of gender inequality and toxic masculinity. May shared, "…I feel like males also just get away with a lot in their behaviour…". Angel recounted their experience at University and observing males' sexualised behaviours towards females, explaining "…I really hated that because it also implied that to be a woman is to be an object." Venus discussed that whilst "…men in society are classed as being superior..." they can also be detrimentally affected by toxic masculinity, explaining that "…words like 'man up' are often used towards kids, umm and that, boys are told that they shouldn't cry. They shouldn't be upset." Venus linked this to males experiencing additional barriers in accessing mental health support, sharing, "…I feel much more comfortable doing it in comparison to, like my boyfriend…". Indeed, many adolescents spoke of the harm toxic masculinity posed to males directly and the notion that "…boys don't cry, that they're not allowed to express their emotions…" (Bailey) in addition to the harm posed to others in society.

Most references of gender inequalities highlighted a sense of an imbalance of power, status and autonomy bestowed upon men, with the subordination of women. Adolescents' accounts highlighted how these disparities exist from an early age. Cleo shared, "…boys can kind of do what they want and it's 'boys will be boys', is the big kind of quote about it. Whereas girls have to kind of do things more, to please almost please other people".

Echoing stereotypical gendered expectations of females and constructions of femininity in society, Billy reflected the contrast between the expectations placed upon males compared to themselves, explaining that they were "… kind of expected to be perfectly behaved" and be "…dainty and demure …". May also recounted their school experiences in which there was "…pressure for the girls to always act better than the boys…". May highlighted how such imbalances in expectations can escalate with devastating consequences:

> …I was umm sexually assaulted growing up when I was quite young. The boy that I knew who did it, he got away with nothing. I told the adults umm in charge about it, they said, "Oh, he's just a boy. Boys are just like that." and if anything, they're more shamed me for allowing it to happen because girls are just meant to be sort of so polite, they're not meant to cause problems and drama…

Intersectionality and Socio-Political Context. Gender was just one aspect of adolescent's intersectional identities. All adolescents spoke about their different minoritised social category statuses and how associated stereotypes and systems of discrimination overlapped with interdependent consequences. Despite not being explicitly asked by the researcher, most adolescents discussed the interplay of autism in terms of their understanding and evaluations of gender stereotypes "…I always found that very annoying and arbitrary …I've been like, is this an autism thing or a gender thing? And the answer is yes. The answer is both." (Starlight) and their adherence to stereotypes, "…because umm, I'm not neurotypical, I'm neurodivergent, umm I didn't meet lots of those stereotypes…" (May).

Both Cleo and May, spoke about gendered stereotypes associated with autism and how they felt this impacted their experiences, comparing this to the experiences of their autistic brothers:

> … most of the the data and everything in regards to autism has all been done on little boys. So I was a very, very emotional child and would have quite extreme meltdowns, umm over like the smallest things and get into trouble for it a lot [laugh] rather than them considering that it could have been something further because I was a girl. (Cleo)

> … one like really key gender stereotype I feel like impacted me growing up is the fact that I went undiagnosed autistic like the majority of my life because of the way that umm there's like these stereotypes of how autism is presented in men is really pushed on umm all the all genders in society, … and growing up my parents always sort of pushed on me that umm because like I'm a woman, like I'm able to, like have control over like like my emotions more because umm women who have like with autism often mask more …. So I went undiagnosed. My brother was diagnosed at quite a young age because of the stereotypes. (May)

As such, May and Cleo highlighted expectations of females to exert restraint over emotions and the link to the concept of masking as a means of presenting in a manner expected of females. Furthermore, May linked the effects of masking on the fact they were undiagnosed on account of their presentation and society’s gendered assumptions surrounding autism.

Additionally, May discussed how gendered autism stereotypes impacted them in school and that “…teachers didn't understand me and they couldn't help me.” As such, adolescents discussed the nature of how others perceived, interacted and supported them was influenced by being seen as female and thus not fitting the stereotypical, male-centred view of autism and also not meeting the expectations around how “…the ‘normal woman’ should behave...” (May). This reflects the double exclusion faced as an autistic, subject to societally imposed, female gender expectations. Ash referred to the impact that male centric narratives around autism had on them as an AFAB individual, “…you and I both know this is a really outdated way to look at it, but the whole kind of masculine brain thing, I think that really did do a number on my head…”. Adolescents recounted the interconnected nature that assumptions around gender and autism had on them personally, with detrimental consequences on their lives and sense of identity.

May and Sosa reflected upon their experience of gender stereotypes as individuals from minoritised ethnic backgrounds which brought additional interconnected layers of assumptions and expectations, which compounded discrimination in a patriarchal hegemonic society:

> … people who are queer people who are just like neurodivergent in any way. There's just, like anyone who, like, like, differs from, like, the idea of being, like, the typical man, umm like, that more impacts on them, but I think there are some people in society who are at, like, the most, like, negatively impacted and I think at the core of that, it is women and it is women who are queer, who also then are also people of colour. I feel like when you like stack them on top of each other, that's when it's like the most negatively impacted.

May shared their heightened feelings of vulnerability, linked to be neurodivergent and "… biologically a woman … And because I am black as well, and then that's just the sexualisation of that on top of it all." highlighting the adultification and sexualisation associated with being perceived as a black female.

As well as feelings of vulnerability, Sosa shared the need felt to actively monitor how they come across to others on account of racial gendered stereotypes:

> …since my teenage years I've been very aware of sort of how I am perceived as a black woman, in spaces and there was a time where I kind of would like tone myself down intentionally so as not to be seen as like the angry black woman in the room.

Adolescents spoke about immediate social contexts, i.e., family and education setting, shaping their experiences of gender stereotypes. For some, family members offered an alternate, counter narrative to gender stereotypes prevalent in society "… my parents didn't really enforce gender stereotypes that strongly in our house and they were very regularly challenged growing up in our house." (Sosa). Emily explained that whilst experiencing gender stereotypes from a young age, her "… parents have always been quite umm, friendly and open to me, expressing myself." For some however, family were less supportive. Venus expressed a sense of newfound freedom that came with moving out of the family home, sharing "… I can be my own person in my own space. Without having to, you know, be stuck in a house with my parents who have, maybe differing views to me. Umm, or like tell me what I can and can't do."

Adolescents typically recounted school systems and experiences which created a culture of gender expectations in which adolescents often felt misunderstood. May explained, "…I went to an all girls school so there was lots of like, gender stereotypes there…". Gerti shared the following primary school experience:

> … I always had sort of shoulder, if not longer, length hair as a child and quite often got bullied about it and I remember the teachers just saying 'Well, cut your hair then.' … 'Boys have short hair, so if you have long hair, people are going to find it strange'.

Gerti therefore highlights the reprimands adolescents experienced for not adhering to established gender norms and stereotypes within a cisnormative society in relation to expectations around appearance.

Bailey recounted their college teacher saying, "'Boys I don't expect you to know this, but girls, you know, when you're watching your mum in the kitchen, and she adds bicarbonate of soda to the chickpeas.'". As such, adolescents shared instances in which gender stereotypes were present and perpetuated within educational settings by school staff.

In addition to adolescents' immediate social network, many spoke about the socio-cultural zeitgeist, including the role of policies, politics and religion. Gerti spoke of the "…rise of quite scary anti diversity, equity and inclusion rhetoric…" within society and that "…the whole Overton window is just generally shifted further to the right, which is enabled more extreme views to be expressed… it's not free speech without consequences, and the consequences are that people like me end up feeling quite vulnerable about being gender queer…"

Emily shared concerns around the impact of policies on the trans community saying, "…in America, a lot of what Donald Trump's been saying, umm and Project 2025, has, umm created a lot of misinformation for a lot of people. And has generally painted trans people in a worse light than is actually true." Ash, spoke about the role of religion, sharing that there are "…far right sects of

Christianity that tends to be largely enforced, umm, the gender stereotypes definitely with like the home making mum and all the trad wife movement...”. Hence adolescents identified several socio-cultural and political structures that maintained and enforced gender stereotypes. Their accounts also highlight the context-dependent variables which shaped how they experience and navigate gender stereotypes.

Reprimand and Vulnerability. Adolescents felt excluded, outcasted and punished for not abiding by and fitting into the hegemonic discourse surrounding gender. Ash shared, “…I was disliked for being so bravely, not what I should be like.” May explained, “…there are lots of stereotypes of how like the ‘normal woman’ should behave as well, like neurotypical and since I didn't meet those standards, it led to quite a lot of bullying…”. Starlight highlighted being in spaces and feeling that “…anyone who isn't visibly a cis and is expected to not take up very much space.” Angel expressed that “…it's difficult, getting to grips with the idea that who you are isn't always just immediately accepted by everyone.” This was a common sentiment amongst the adolescents with the sense that “…if you don't fit the stereotype, then, yeah, some certain people are going to dislike you for it.” (Cleo).

Some adolescents recounted instances of physical harm and incitement of violence. Emily recalled that a “…group of boys started like kicking the back of my feet … because I didn't fit into their idea of what either a man or a woman looks like.” Gerti described an instance in which as a teenager their colleague was “…talking about how, umm being being gender queer, umm it’s just a trend and he’d love to beat a faggot, a faggot to death, umm and laughing about it.” This had a clear impact on Gerti as they went on to explain “…you don't know if that middle-aged bloke across the street is the one you know, spewing about how, umm DI [Diversity and Inclusion] initiatives are brainwashing kids and that, that trans people should all die [and that] today, might be the day that I get attacked”.

Adolescents’ description and accounts of gender stereotypes clearly demonstrates the negative consequences that such views can have on society which can lead to enacted acts of discrimination and physical violence, creating feelings of vulnerability and fear. Gerti shared that,

"…the rise of just cataclysmically vile bilge being spilled out across the Internet about my community makes me feel a little bit more vulnerable."

Questioning the Status Quo - "oh everyone else is in these boxes and I've never really been in one."

Theme two reflects adolescents noticing that they did not necessarily fit in with the hegemonic expectations and assumptions surrounding gender, as discussed in Theme one and the process of questioning the need to. Part of this process included discovering and exploring different ways of enacting gender, by connecting with others, via media and groups.

Not cottoning on or Fitting in. Many adolescents spoke about not fully grasping gender expectations growing up and yet a sense of being aware that they did not quite fit in with their peers. Billy expressed that they were "…constantly feeling like I'm not doing it right in terms of trying but not succeeding." Ash shared that "…learning the sort of the way that I was being a girl was wrong… wasn't great for my mental health." Ash also explained that "…I didn't fit the status quo with a lot of my female friends, like, they would giggle and I wouldn't know what was funny." concluding that "…I think with the gender thing, I think I just kind of didn't cotton on to what stereotypes were expected of me."

Billy held a similar view, drawing parallels with implicit social rules, often associated with autism, "…I haven't been able to just, fit in with being a woman because, I, it hasn't just, yeah, like, sublimated into my consciousness in the way that I've also had to, like, almost like, yeah, put, make an explicit effort to learn social rules …". Gerti also spoke about how being autistic meant that they interpreted rules and expectations around gender differently, explaining; "…it's not like I play by a different rule book, it's just that I interpret the rule book differently…. the way other neurotypical, neurotypical but queer authors can talk about gender is just qualitatively different.". Gerti linked this to the theories they studied at university surrounding autism explaining:

> …I fit right into what the literature says about, you know, just not, just just viewing social expectancy qualitatively differently, and coming at the world through a completely different lens … that same kind of little framework, that little box that I had to fit into didn't exist….

Angel spoke about their experiences as a gender fluid individual, growing up with a non-binary parent:

> …I know people that are non-binary who have cis parents and they often talk about a moment when they, they suddenly realise they, you know, they had this huge moment of of realisation that they were different to what they thought they'd always been. Umm, and then they came out to their parents and and it was this big thing. Whereas for me it was more of I never really questioned it, until I got to uni and thought, oh everyone else is in these boxes and I've never really been in one.

Discovery and Exploration. Media, particularly social media, was a means for many adolescents to discover and explore different ways of expressing gender. For some, exploration and understanding of gender stereotypes came from "… quite a lot of posts on social media." (Bailey), which enabled them to "…gain a deeper understanding" (Venus) of gender diversity. Cleo explained:

> …my generation, so like people born 2000's and things like that, umm, were brought up with the Internet and have seen a lot more and are a lot open to a lot more across the world … so we were kind of brought up being told one thing but then being able to see another one…

Additionally, social media afforded Cleo opportunities for "…making friends with people that were older and had been through these things as well…"**.**

Indeed, adolescents also spoke of the value and importance of representation in media and society for LGBTQ + individuals in respect to their own sense of identity and being able to relate to others:

> …it helps to see women doing womanhood in different ways and seeing different ages of woman do womanhood in different ways like, you know, you see, like Karen, from HR down there with her like, silly little barber's haircut, and it makes you feel better because I've had stuff like that where I just really enjoyed having my hair short. (Ash)

Cleo discussed the reassurance of seeing older individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, as it gives them "…something to look up to…someone who, OK, they've been through this. They got through this. I can do that too." Starlight also spoke about working with children and being an example to them that "…this person is also visibly queer in their space. And no one really minds. And everyone is chill about it.'" Hence adolescents valued representation and the benefits that came from being part of a LGBTQ + community, free of judgment.

Another aspect of the exploration process entailed questioning and resisting arbitrary norms and expectations. In turn, adolescents started to form their own views which often opposed the hegemonic discourse. Some adolescents "…ignored umm the expectations they, that society puts onto me." (Emily) and chose to live their lives, "…not guided by gendered principles at all..." (Ash). For others, resistance was more active with Billy, explaining, "I probably recognise from quite a young age, my own kind of, dislike of gender stereotypes and sort of, when I was like a kid, I'd try to push back at them quite a lot." For others they recounted recognition during their teenage years, "It's sort of set off a fire inside me to just go, 'No, this is wrong. This is so very wrong' … 'This isn't appropriate. You can't be saying that'" (Bailey). Such discord was often coupled with a sense of active resistance as Starlight expressed, "…I'm going to be that angry gender confused lesbian even harder, now I'm going to do it even more loudly now because you're annoyed about it." As such, adolescents described actively resisting stereotypes as well as ignoring them in a process that developed in parallel with their emerging gender identity.

Self Identification and Reconceptualisation – "a fun box to expand on"

Theme three highlights participant's self-identification and pride in their identity, including the supportive factors they feel enable this. Additionally, it captures adolescents deconstructing gender norms and reconstructing notions of gender and sexuality.

Supportive Factors. Adolescents highlighted the importance of connecting with like-minded individuals with similar experiences and views, typically others within the LGBTQ+ community and the role this played in understanding and embracing their own identity. Sosa shared that queer spaces allowed them not to "… feel like I have to, leave that side of myself at the door in order to be understood as I am." and that "…rejecting a lot of those gender stereotypes has allowed me to be myself and being in spaces that, with people who also reject a lot of those gender stereotypes."

concluding that in queer spaces, "…gender stereotypes just don't really carry as much weight.". Similarly, Starlight stated that "… my freedom and expressing the way I want to like present, the way I want to present, is 100% down to being in a community with other queer people."

Adolescents shared factors that fostered a sense of acceptance and safety in wider public spaces, "…I think the obvious one is the LGBT flag being shown in some description, you know if a shop has it on there then it's fair game, you know, I can just be myself." (Gerti). For many, having one's gender identity seen, accepted and respected by others allowed them to be themselves. Venus recounted that in college they "…asked, umm, my friends and teachers to call me Sammy instead of Samantha because Samantha's my birth name. So, I asked them to call me Sammy instead, which most people did, umm, which was really nice.". This highlights the pivotal role education settings can play for adolescents, during their identity journeys by providing, affirmative, inclusive environments which respects adolescents wishes and needs.

For Billy, "…representation and seeing people who are also being themselves, whether that's in, you know, a gender way or in a different way, but like kind of sort of setting the tone of being a safe kind of space to express yourself." and "…people putting their pronouns in, like, their kind of work handle…." enabled them to be themself without the fear of "backlash". Angel shared "...all I'm really looking for is people to be accepting. So it just takes, if someone uses they/them pronoun. There you go. I'm safe. That's all it takes. Umm, for someone to demonstrate that they are willing to accept people like me, … literally one word."

"I am who I am". Participants discussed their self-identification, including gender identity and pronoun preference, expressing this proudly, using terminology that resonated with them personally. Angel shared:

> …I finally hit the point where I go, OK, no, I am fully non-binary. I want people to use they/them pronouns. I want people to see me as a woman and a man. And having done that, I feel like I'm finally able to be myself around people.

"…I like the label gender queer quite a lot because like, my gender is just being queer and that's the closest I can get to defining it" (Starlight). Venus expressed that "…if someone refers to me by she/her, I don't even correct them at this point. I don't really care if they want to do that… It's for me that I refer to myself that way.”. Cleo too expressed a similar sentiment “…I am who I am”.

Most adolescents discussed how connected their gender and sexual identity were and the process of exploring these aspects of their identity:

> …because I am bisexual, and kind of discovering that around age fourteen, I was like, ‘oh, God, well, I like girls’. And what does that mean about my gender? Does that mean that I'm not a girl because I like girls? (Cleo)

Bailey shared “…I'm also a lesbian… I'm very proud about it …I don't hide it. I'm not ashamed of it…” As such, many adolescents discussed being queer, with gender and sexuality interlinked, “…when I talk about queerness, I mean both gender and sexuality, because to me they are inseparable…” (Gerti).

Adolescents spoke of the process of maturing and embracing their identity, demonstrating personal growth and change. Often this related to coming out to those around them which was not initially easy as Angel reflected:

> …it was never about casting out the thing that you thought you were and becoming something new, which a lot of other non-binary people seem to relate to. For me it was trying to be myself in a world that, often opposes what I am.

Adolescents discussed the role their appearance had in expressing themselves. Venus shared, “…I really struggled when I first came out … And it took me a long while to kind of just, just be OK with dressing how I want ….”, Ash spoke about embracing their identity and being “…very proudly outside of the norm” with their clothing and appearance reflecting them;

> …throwing my hands up and throwing my middle fingers up and going. Do you know what, I've tried to please your gender stereotypes for years, I'm just simply not doing it anymore. If you want me to be a woman, I'll be a woman. But I won't be the woman you like.

Similarly, Gerti shared that, “Things that enable me to express myself the way I want to umm would be anything that that makes me stand out and anything that would that would make me be differentiated and alternative…”. As such adolescents, discussed the importance of dressing “…how I want to as opposed to how society wants me to dress.” (Emily) and knowing that “…it is OK for me to be me and I can be me unapologetically.” (Bailey).

Evaluation of Gender Stereotypes and Gender. Adolescents’ understanding and experiences of gender stereotypes cumulates and is illustrated by their views and evaluations of them, including, their prevalence in society and their impact on themself and others. Cleo expressed that “…a lot of gender stereotypes are more old fashioned views.” and that “…it's just how people see where different genders fit in society. And obviously some people don't have as strong views on that. But then some people are very boys are boys and girls are girls and that's the end of it for them. [laugh]”

Overwhelmingly, adolescents viewed gender stereotypes as reductive, social norms and expectations that are “placed onto” (Emily) others which are “…harmful to whatever community you're a part of.” (Bailey). Gerti shared that:

> …I kind of, view gender stereotypes in critique of masculinity, mostly umm because of how that upholds patri…, yeah, patriarchy and and suppresses women, umm I find that for me, gender stereotypes for for men are quite toxic, obviously kind of all about, being muscular or or a breadwinner … whereas I think gender stereotypes for for women are much more about, umm beauty standards, umm subordination to men, and childbearing…

Making connections between systems of heteronormativity, patriarchy, and cisgender normativity and the policing of such norms, Gerti surmised that “…gender stereotypes are a vehicle for oppression and suppression, rather than as a vehicle for expression and satisfaction…”

Adolescents discussed their own understanding of gender and the process of forming their own views and opinions. For Gerti, they conceptualised gender as “…being so fluid, umm so intersectional that it's just not categorical anymore.” Similarly, Venus explained “I don't really understand gender and why, people feel the need to identify and this like binary.” For Starlight, “… it was very obvious to see kind of how, arbitrary gender stuff is, but also how contradictory it is….” Starlight said of gender “…it's something that is, you define it internally, but also it does in the way that you then define it internally, umm, is reflecting how you kind of move through the world and how you do or don't adhere to those stereotypes..."

Such insight enabled adolescents to understand their own gender identity. For Billy, this understanding was interconnected with their understanding of being autistic:

> …accepting being autistic helped me to kind of accept my gender more. I think because it helped me to realise how much I, the conflict around like gender stereotypes and the confusion around it was related to the fact that I was like, 'oh, wait, gender stereotypes and stuff are just like social norms. And I don't really get them and oh, that's because they are kind of just a load of bullocks … it kind of makes sense, that I don't really get them because they don't exist and so, that's why I'm kind of, I don't just explicitly accept them...

Gerti concluded that "…if I was just dropped on this Earth myself, as if I was like spawning in on Minecraft or something, and if I was the only person on it, gender just wouldn't exist…"

As such, adolescents discussed questioning the status quo and dismantling unhelpful, restrictive narratives that exist in society and have been put onto them via gender socialisation in the form of implicit and explicit expectations often enforced by reprimands. As Starlight shared, "…you are taught that it's kind of quite a narrow box, and … It's all more blurry than you thought, isn't it? It's all more of a mess than they tell you when you're five." Starlight discussed their experience of being a Drag King and engaging in "…visible gender fuckery …blending a lot of masculine and feminine stereotypes." sharing, "… you are taught that it's kind of quite a narrow box, and I think that made it more of a fun box to expand on.".

Discussion

Previous research indicates that gender diverse autistic adolescents are at risk of not being understood in terms of their gender identity. The current study explored autistic, gender diverse adolescents' views of gender stereotypes and stigma existing in a society with typically cisnormative expectations. Additionally, we sought to understand factors that support autistic, gender diverse adolescents to develop an authentic sense of self. Three themes were developed: Pressures to Conform - "you are taught that it's kind of quite a narrow box", Questioning the Status Quo - "oh everyone else is in these boxes and I've never really been in one" and Self Identification and Reconceptualisation - "a fun box to expand on".

Findings demonstrate that adolescents had established nuanced and informed conceptualisations of their gender identities. Adolescents resisted and rejected prevalent arbitrary binary gender roles and embraced fluid individualistic conceptualisations of gender. Adolescents highlighted a range of factors, including socio-political and immediate social environments that influenced their experiences of gender stereotypes and in turn gender identity. Furthermore, adolescents spoke of the intersectional nature of their minority group identity statuses. These findings parallel those recently found amongst nonbinary autistic adults (Voltaire et al., 2024).

In relation to the first research question, 'How do adolescents, who identify as autistic and gender-diverse, conceptualise gender stereotypes?'. Adolescents regarded gender stereotypes as outdated notions regarding what gender is and the associated roles, behaviours and appearance expected and assumed. Such expectations are placed onto children from a young age and continue into adulthood. Adolescents saw gender stereotypes as permeating into all aspects of life, serving as a "vehicle for oppression and suppression." Thus, adolescent's conceptualisation of gender stereotype was shaped by their unique plurality of experiences.

The second research question examined participants experience of gender stereotypes, which as mentioned, were typically oppressive in nature, perpetuated by the socio-political systems existing in their formative years. Restrictive cisnormative views were expressed in adolescents' immediate social contexts, including school, resulting in adolescents feeling confined by gendered societal expectations which seem to permeate across all aspects of life.

Regarding the third research question, 'How do gender stereotypes influence adolescents', who identify as gender diverse and autistic, sense of identity?', adolescents spoke of becoming aware that they were not always 'cottoning on' or fitting in with their peers. Adolescents discussed their different minoritised social category statuses and how associated stereotypes and systems of discrimination overlapped with interdependent consequences. Most adolescents discussed the interplay of autism and gender stereotypes in terms of their understanding and evaluations of gender stereotypes. Many raised the consequences of gendered narratives around autism that detrimentally impacted recognition and diagnostic journeys. Adolescents, who spoke of experiencing expectations traditionally associated with female stereotypes, also spoke of a double exclusion from both a female and autism identity and feeling they fitted expectations of neither, on account of dominant gendered conceptualisations of autism and neurotypical portrayals of females. For many, being autistic meant that they saw gender qualitatively differently on account of not intuitively understanding and often dismissing arbitrary social expectations.

Two participants spoke of the intersection of their race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991), highlighting the additional stereotypes associated with black females and thus their experiences of adultification and sexualisation (Epstein, 2017). The influence gender stereotypes had on adolescents' sense of identity was notably interconnected with their sexuality. Akin to findings from Tebbe and colleagues' (2024) study exploring transgender and nonbinary adults' experiences of gender and sexuality, our findings indicate that participant's identity and self-concept coevolved around gender and sexuality and as such adolescents regarded their gender and sexuality as inseparable. In line with Tyni and colleagues' (2024) systematic review, participants often regarded gender identity as "fluid" and "intersectional" as opposed to "categorical". Such conceptualisations are perhaps at odds with the 'extreme male brain theory' and the 'female autism phenotype'. Akin to Speechley and colleagues (2024) Diverse Gender Identity Framework, adolescents discussed both internal and external gender negotiation reflecting the complexity and variability of their ongoing identity development.

In respect to the final research question, adolescents highlighted several supportive factors that enabled them to develop an authentic sense of self including; representation, community, allyship as well as supportive family and friends. As was found by Tyni and colleagues (2024), adolescents in the current study stressed the importance of supportive, inclusive environments that enabled genuine self-expression and exploration. Such environments were often queer spaces with shared language and understanding in which gender stereotypes held less weight (Speechley et al., 2024). Adolescents also discussed displays of allyship. Whilst the term and notion of LGBTQ+ allyship is complex and not without controversy (see Cumming-Potvin, 2024) adolescents in the current study spoke of the importance of being seen, accepted and respected by cis individuals through displaying the pride flag and using pronoun handles in emails. As Vines and colleagues (2025) found, adolescents spoke of the importance of supportive, affirming educational environments.

Despite not a topic area raised by the researcher in the interview guide, every adolescent referred to the role of media, typically social media in their lives. For some it was a means by which gender stereotypes can spread in society and fuel hate and discrimination towards minoritised groups. At the same time, adolescents discussed the positive aspects afforded by social media, such as opportunities for representation and enabling connection with other gender diverse individuals. Adolescents spoke of the information they acquired via social media, including a richer vocabulary and outlooks regarding gender identity and expression, which reflective of previous findings, enabled them to fully explore and conceptualise their gender (Adelman et al., 2022; Bragg et al., 2018; Speechley et al., 2024). Such platforms can also offer means of self-expression, to form social connections and seek support, which can play a considerable role in adolescents' identity exploration and formation (Bishop et al., 2020; Puckett et al., 2022).

Implications

In April 2025, the Supreme Court in the UK concluded that, in respect of the Equality Act (2010), the term "woman" refers to biological sex. A group of independent human rights experts have warned that the ruling risks "…entrenching legal uncertainty and undermining the rights of transgender persons in all aspects of life, including education". (United Nations, 2025, para.2). Before the ruling, the United Nations Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity highlighted in the end of mission statement, points 50 and 51, that concerns surround the,

> "…UK Government failures to protect trans children in schools, and negative mental health consequences for children from toxic discourse.
>
> 51. That lack of adequately comprehensive and inclusive RSE and health education puts UK children at an increased risk of bullying, mental health issues, and self-harm…" (Madrigal-Borloz, 2023, p. 10-11).

In December 2023, in the UK, the Department for Education published draft guidance for teachers on support for pupils questioning their gender. Guidance included informing parents of the child's identity, consideration of other 'factors' such as sexuality, influence of peers and social media and whether school should "seek input from the SENCO or college's SEND lead" (p.10). Such suggestions risk undermining and belittling children and young people's autonomy, thus dismissing them as experts in their own lives.

In line with Harris and colleagues' (2021) findings, insights from this study suggest that gender diverse adolescents can experience school settings and culture as confronting environments that perpetuate gender stereotypes, with curricula that favours male-dominated perspectives (Kim & Ringrose, 2018). Given the formative role that schools play in adolescent's lives, they are key environments in which to challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender equalities (Bragg et al., 2018). This could include greater diversity of gender content on the formal curriculum and greater transparency and exploration of feminism and toxic masculinity. By educating all about gender diversity and sexuality, there is scope to shape the school cultural environment, thus promoting understanding and respect.

Adolescents reported feeling mis-understood by teachers and indeed Harris and colleagues' (2021) found that teachers were often unaware of discrimination that LGBT+ students experience in school. As such, there is the need for educators to have suitable training and understanding of gender identity in order to take proactive steps to foster inclusion in education settings. As demonstrated by the current study, adolescents are reconceptualising the nature and possibilities of gender, therefore education settings should promote environments in which educators seek to learn from their pupils and respect them as the experts that they are. Such principles also extend to a wide range of professionals and settings that support children and adolescents. Indeed, adolescents noted that signs of respect and acceptance, such as use of their chosen names and pronouns was vital, offering a crucial sense of recognition, legitimacy and safety to be themselves (Tyni et al., 2024).

It is important to ensure that settings foster safe and open discussions that embrace neurodiversity-affirming and queer-affirming approaches at every level of the community to ensure practices are embedded into the ethos of the setting and not merely tokenistic (Voltaire, 2024). As suggested by Russell and colleagues (2014), this could take the form of whole school training for staff, inclusive whole school policies that acknowledges the needs and promoted the rights of all, as well as supporting the presence of student support groups which promote alliances amongst all pupils.

Adolescents described the juxtaposing influence that media, in particular social media, can have on their identity development. On one hand it can offer a wider, inclusive narrative surrounding gender and opportunities to connect with others, providing representation, hence support exploration and gender identity formation (Wynne et al., 2021). However, it can also be a source of misinformation, hate and discrimination and spread anti-trans rhetoric and stereotypes of the LGBT+ community (Madrigal-Borloz, 2023) which can negatively affect adolescents' wellbeing. As such there is the need to support adolescents to navigate social media safely and to educate young people about the impact comments made on social media can have on others.

Strengths and Limitations

The current study sought to gain the voices of autistic gender diverse adolescents, positioning them as experts of their own lives. As such the research design sought to embed the following five topics relevant to participatory research: Respect, Authenticity, Assumptions, Infrastructure and Empathy (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019). In line with this stance and aware of the importance of self-identification, participants were asked to self-identify their gender, pronouns and ethnicity, via open text questions. Participants were also asked to provide preferred pseudonyms and autism language, hence respecting and valuing individualised perspectives and acknowledging the complexity of language preferences. This affords participants the greatest freedom in selecting an identity and does not rely upon the researcher to anticipate potential terms (Cameron & Stinson, 2019). Aware of disparities surrounding autism diagnoses, autism inclusion criterion was solely based on self-report.

Furthermore, an iterative methodology was used to allow participants a range of means by which to share their views, including paper-based approaches (both text and symbol supported material), interviews and focus groups. As recommended by Bailey and colleagues (2015), providing a flexible range of methods offered greater scope for the involvement of adolescents with varying communication approaches and thus inclusion of under-represented groups in research (Keating, 2021). Such approach enabled all participants greater control and choice over how they shared their views.

Synthesisised member checking was undertaken to explore if researcher developed themes, based on all participants' interviews, resonated with participants' personal views. Given recruitment approaches, only participants recruited via charities and education settings were invited to contribute. Participants were sent the initial analytical themes developed accompanied with an overview of the themes and provided with the opportunity to offer both rating and descriptive feedback regarding whether the themes resonated with their experiences (see Appendix C). Thus, participants were given the opportunity to further reflect upon their experiences and share these reflections with the researcher in line with a constructionist, iterative approach. Participants were also invited make suggestions for dissemination approaches (Harvey, 2015; Birt et al., 2016). Based upon Birt and colleagues' (2016) five-step tool for synthesised member checking, participant's reflections were fed back into the researcher's final conceptualisation, as presented in this paper.

Drawing upon Hart's (1992) Ladder of Children's Participation, the current study adopted aspects found on the higher rungs of the ladder, i.e., Consulted and Informed and Adult/Researcher-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Children/ participants**,** thus reflecting children's participation rights, anchored in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and recognising children's abilities to speak for themselves. Future research should seek to involve children and young people further in research, by adopting participatory methods, including advisory participants groups that seek to redress power imbalances and empower participants (see Davison et al., 2022). Indeed, participatory research in the field of autism can enhance the quality of research methods as well as situate findings within real-world context and practice (Carrington et al., 2016; Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019), offering relevant outcomes for the autism community (Long et al., 2017).

Recruitment via Prolific may have resulted in a bias for individuals with greater literacy rates given the process entailed in signing up to the platform. Furthermore, participants were predominantly aged 18 years or over. Younger adolescents may be able to speak to views and experiences of their emerging gender identity formation in a manner older adolescents, who have potentially reached different gender identity milestones (Woodman, 2018) may not be able to, as they tend to be retrospective reflecting on their experiences through an often more established world view and sense of identity, as outlined in Speechley and colleagues' Diverse Gender Identity Framework (2024).

The current study was inductive and exploratory in nature, with broad research questions. For instance specific questions relating to autism and gender stereotypes were not asked during the interviews, as the researcher was mindful not to assume this would be pertinent to adolescents. Whilst this enabled participants to discuss aspects pertinent to them it subsequently resulted in the generation of broad themes. As such, future research could explore specific research questions which do explicitly refer to autism and gender stereotypes, to gain greater understanding.

The majority of participants in the current study (n = 8), discussed being socialised as female growing up and findings may therefore be more representative of individuals who have experiences of being socialised as female growing up and the associated stereotypes and discrimination with being perceived as female in a patriarchal society. As highlighted by participants, there exists in society, binary, polarised expectations put onto individuals on the basis of whether they are perceived as male or female, which shape one's experiences and thus views.

Conclusion

Gender stereotypes influence how gender diverse autistic adolescents navigate and form their gender identity in a complex interplay with other aspects of their identity. Adolescents discussed their personal and nuanced journeys of forming their gender identity, from being aware of societally imposed gender norms and pressures to conform whilst also realising that gender expectations and norms vary dependent upon culture and contexts and thus their arbitrary nature. For many adolescents, their understanding of gender and gender stereotypes was interconnected with their understanding of being autistic. Such insight enabled the realisation that they do not "…really get them because they don't exist" (Billy). In turn, this empowered adolescents to question the status quo and self-identify with other individuals and concepts that resonated with them, finding safe inclusive spaces to be themselves. As such, autistic, gender diverse adolescents showed their aptitude, as epistemic agents, to reconceptualise what gender means or indeed could mean and thus as Starlight expressed, recognise gender and associated norms as "a fun box to expand on".

Appendix A Terms and Syntax used for each Database

A.1 Search Terms and Syntax used for the Database PsychInfo (05.10.24)

Category	Search Terms
Population	autis* OR ASC OR ASD OR asperger* OR aspie OR "pervasive developmental disorder" OR "pathological demand avoidance"
	AND
Population	adolescen* OR teen* OR "young adul*" OR youth OR "young people" OR minors OR children
	AND
Phenomenon of Interest	conceptuali* N2 autis* OR understand* N2 autis* OR descri* N2 autis* OR defin* N2 autis* OR view N2 autis* OR self concept N2 autis* OR identity N2 autis*

Search returned 1788 articles. Following database screening tools applied; Academic Journals + English + Empirical study, which left 855 articles.

A.2 Search Terms and Syntax used for the Database Scopus (06.10.24)

Category	Search Terms
Population	autis* OR ASC OR ASD OR asperger* OR aspie OR {pervasive developmental disorder} OR {pathological demand avoidance}
	AND
Population	adolescen* OR teen* OR {young adul*} OR youth OR {young people} OR minors OR children
	AND
Phenomenon of Interest	conceptuali* W/2 autis* OR understand* W/2 autis* OR descri* W/2 autis* OR defin* W/2 autis* OR view W/2 autis* OR "self concept W/2 autis*" OR identity W/2 autis*

Search returned 95 articles. Following database screening tools applied N2 ->W/2 and {} for exact phrases “.

A.3 Search Terms and Syntax used for the Database Scopus (06.10.24)

Category	Search Terms
Population	autis* OR ASC OR ASD OR asperger* OR aspie OR "pervasive developmental disorder" OR "pathological demand avoidance"
Population	**AND** adolescen* OR teen* OR "young adul*" OR youth OR "young people" OR minors OR children
Phenomenon of Interest	**AND** conceptuali* NEAR/2 autis* OR understand* NEAR/2 autis* OR descri* NEAR/2 autis* OR defin* NEAR/2 autis* OR view NEAR/2 autis* OR self concept NEAR/2 autis* OR identity NEAR/2 autis*

Search returned 407 articles. Following database screening tools applied; NOT (Instructional Material/Guideline AND Editorial AND Book AND Speech/Lecture AND Directory AND Bibliography AND General Information AND Government & Official Document AND Teaching Material) and English, which left 353 articles.

A.4 Search Terms and Syntax used for the Database Web of Science (06.10.24)

Category	Search Terms
Population	autis* OR ASC OR ASD OR asperger* OR aspie OR "pervasive developmental disorder" OR "pathological demand avoidance"
Population	**AND** adolescen* OR teen* OR "young adul*" OR youth OR "young people" OR minors OR children
Phenomenon of Interest	**AND** conceptuali* NEAR/2 autis* OR understand* NEAR/2 autis* OR descri* NEAR/2 autis* OR defin* NEAR/2 autis* OR view NEAR/2 autis* OR self concept NEAR/2 autis* OR identity NEAR/2 autis*

Search returned 2940 articles. Following database screening tools applied; which left 1830 articles.

A.5 Search Terms and Syntax used for the Database CINAHL (Ultimate) via EBSCO (06.10.24)

Category	Search Terms
Population	autis* OR ASC OR ASD OR asperger* OR aspie OR "pervasive developmental disorder" OR "pathological demand avoidance"
	AND
Population	adolescen* OR teen* OR "young adul*" OR youth OR "young people" OR minors OR children
	AND
Phenomenon of Interest	conceptuali* N2 autis* OR understand* N2 autis* OR descri* N2 autis* OR defin* N2 autis* OR view N2 autis* OR self concept N2 autis* OR identity N2 autis*

Search returned 581, articles. Following database screening tools applied; Academic Journals, Dissertations English, which left 578 articles.

A.6 Search Terms and Syntax used for the Database Global Index Medicus (06.10.24)

Category	Search Tearms
Population	autis* OR ASC OR ASD OR asperger* OR aspie OR "pervasive developmental disorder" OR "pathological demand avoidance"
	AND
Population	adolescen* OR teen* OR "young adul*" OR youth OR "young people" OR minors OR children

Search returned 3112 articles. Following database screening tools; Qualitative research, English, which left 82 articles.

Note. Phenomenon of Interest category removed as no proximity or adjacency searching feature available on Global Index Medicus.

A.7 Search Terms and Syntax used for the SciELO (06.10.24)

Category	Search Terms
Population	autis* OR ASC OR ASD OR asperger* OR aspie OR “pervasive developmental disorder” OR “pathological demand avoidance”
	AND
Population	adolescen* OR teen* OR "young adul*" OR youth OR "young people" OR minors OR children

Search returned 842 articles. Database screening tools applied, which left 719, but only 716 came across**.**

Note. Phenomenon of Interest category removed as no proximity or adjacency searching feature available on SciELO.

Appendix B Topic Guide Used for Interviews

- **What are gender stereotypes?**
    - What does the term mean to you?
    - Can you give examples to explain them?
    - Has your understanding of gender stereotypes changed over time?

- **Have you experienced gender stereotypes? If yes, what happened?**

    - Can you describe what happened?
    - How did that make you feel?
    - Did it affect you afterwards? Change your views or behaviour?

- **How do gender stereotypes affect you?**

    - Do they affect how you dress?
    - Do they affect your interests?
    - Do they affect their learning?
    - Do they affect how you feel?
    - Do they affect your friendships/relationships?

- **What allows you to be yourself?**

- **Is there anything else you would like to say/tell me about?**

General prompts for more information:

- *Can you tell me more?*
- *Can you give me an example of…*
- *What did that mean to you?*
- *How did that make you feel?*

  Can you explain …

Appendix C Initial Research Findings Feedback Forms

This is Stage 3 of the research project. You indicated that you would like to contribute to the analysis part of the study. This is done by looking at all the comments and information that participants shared, to look for themes, or similarities. Based on initial analysis these appear to be some of the themes or similarities for each of the questions asked., which were: What are gender stereotypes? Have you experienced gender stereotypes? If yes, what happened?, How do gender stereotypes affect you? What allows you to be yourself?

What do you think? Do the initial themes in the table below fit your understanding? You can rate this using the smiley faces below and add any further comments.

Initial Theme	Your rating	Any further comments
1. Pressures to Conform - “you are taught that it's kind of quite a narrow box” This theme reflects the range of genders stereotypes that exist in society and therefore the expectations, assumptions and inequalities that adolescents experience in relation to these. The theme also explores how other aspects of adolescents’ lives, including other identity categories (such as autism and ethnicity) as well as school, family and politics shapes their experience of gender stereotypes. Finally, it looks at the reprimands that adolescents experience, such as being bullied, or told off, for not adhering to gender stereotypes and the subsequent sense of fear and vulnerability this can create.		

2. Questioning the Status Quo - "oh everyone else is in these boxes and I've never really been in one" Theme two reflects adolescents noticing that they did not necessarily fit in with prevailing cisnomative societal expectations and assumptions surrounding gender, as discussed in Theme one and the process of questioning the need to. Part of this process included discovering and exploring different ways of enacting gender, by connecting with others, via media and groups.	😢 1 Strongly Disagree ☹ 2 Disagree 😐 3 Neutral 🙂 4 Agree 😀 5 Strongly Agree	
3. Self Identification and Reconceptualisation - "a fun box to expand on". Theme three highlights participants' self-identification and pride in their identity, including the supportive factors they feel enable this. Additionally, it captures adolescents deconstructing gender norms and reconstructing notions of gender and sexuality.	😢 1 Strongly Disagree ☹ 2 Disagree 😐 3 Neutral 🙂 4 Agree 😀 5 Strongly Agree	

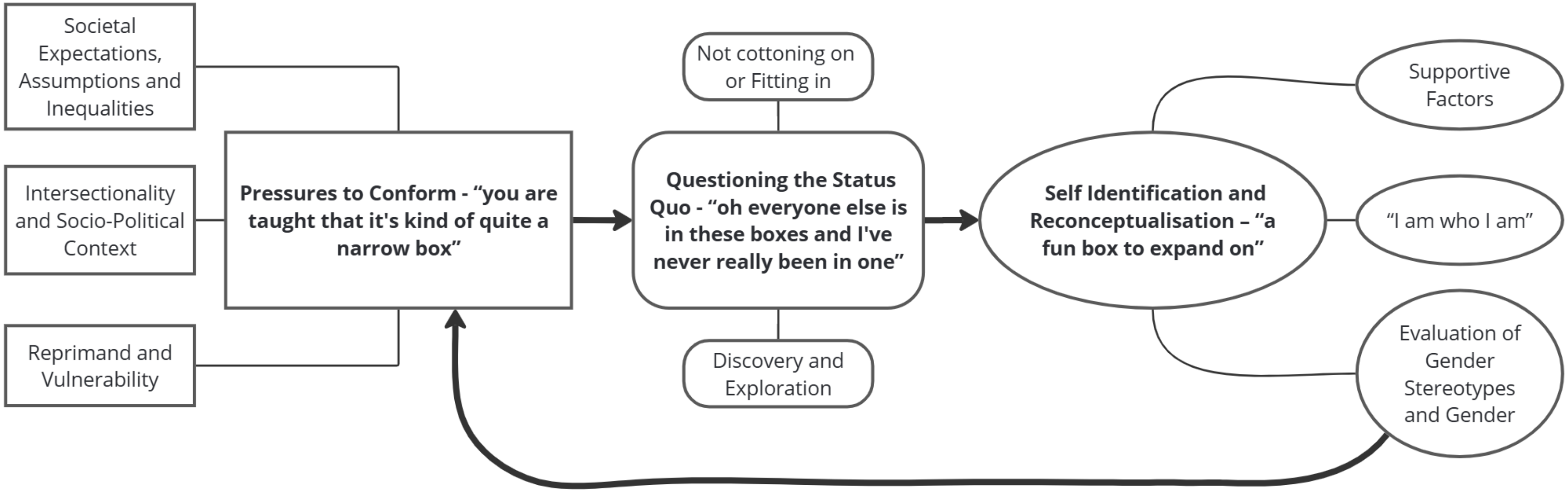
What could be added to the findings to reflect your experiences better?

If there is anything you would like removed, what would that be and why?

This question is about 'Dissemination'. This is the word researchers use to describe how findings will be shared with other people, including participants, other researchers, people who work with and support children and young people and anyone who may be interested in learning more about a particular topic.

When the findings of this project are ready, where do you think the information should be shared? You can circle, highlight or tick the suggestions below or write your own ideas.						
online blog	**social media**	**public event**	**video**	**online poster**	**podcast**	**research journal**
Any other ideas?						
Would you like your pseudonym to included in the acknowledgements section of the write up?					**Yes**	**No**

This is a thematic map, which shows how the different themes have been conceptualised as being interconnected. The three main themes are in the middle, with the smaller shapes representing sub themes. I've included this as it can be helpful to piece together how the themes relate to one another.



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