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# 'These Made-Up Things Mean Nothing to Me': Exploring the Intersection of Autism and Bisexuality in the Lives of Young People

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## ABSTRACT



This article explores the negotiation of autism and bisexuality in the lives of young people (16–25). Identity negotiation in this regard refers to the exploration of how the participants experienced the intersection of bisexuality and autism from a personal and a social perspective. To do this the article uses data collected from interviews and diaries to examine how the participants understood the intersection, how others perceived their identities and how the participants challenged constructions of sexuality. As a result, the article works to move beyond deficit focused research which aims to understand what is missing from an autistic persons' make-up which results in LGBT+ identities. In doing so, it is suggested that a more worthwhile focus is upon socially constructed categories such as sexuality which are more open to be challenged. Bisexuality is uniquely positioned as it challenges a number of preconceptions about sexuality and gender. When combined with being autistic, the lived experiences of young people demonstrate a challenge to sexuality based upon rejecting constructions which are seen as being fragile. Such imperfect labels, such as bisexuality, may be important in furthering our understanding of the intersection.

## KEYWORDS

Bisexuality; autism;  
young people;  
collaborative research

## Introduction

Literature exploring sexuality/gender identity in the lives of autistic people is mostly concerned with attempting to show a link between them (Attanasio et al., 2022; Ingudomnukul et al., 2007). Indeed, research does suggest that autistic people are more likely to be LGBT+ than neurotypicals (Dewinter et al., 2015, 2017; Weir et al., 2021). However, the main focus addressed by research has been upon what it is about autism that results in higher prevalence of LGBT+ identities (Pearlman-Avni et al., 2019; Qualls et al., 2018). Such research has come from a position of deficit where searching

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for answers seems to be in order to discover what is wrong with autistic people that results in this higher prevalence. As will be explored in the literature review, research specifically focusing upon autism and bisexual lived experiences is very much in its infancy. However, in line with previous research, bisexuality is occasionally separated from LGBT+ acronyms to investigate prevalence. Of course, such a consistent focus raises concerns over why it matters whether autistic people are LGBT+ or not, and that such a repeated focus suggests that LGBT+ identities are also seen as deficient and something to be protected from (Corker, 2001; Toft et al., 2020).

If we understand autism as neurodivergence however, the focus on exploring autism and sexuality/gender from a perspective of deficiency is destined to fail. What lived experiences show is that sexuality (in this case bisexuality) is a fragile concept which autism disrupts and challenges. As I have previously suggested, as autism often manifests in not understanding social constructions, the focus when exploring these topics is best applied to understanding the social constructs here, namely sexuality and gender (Toft, 2023). If autistic people are more likely to be LGBT+, then the area of investigation should be upon what autism does to sexuality/gender, as autism clearly disrupts and challenges preconceived notions of how these work in everyday life (see Jackson-Perry, 2020).

This article aims to explore the identity negotiations of young people who are autistic and bisexual from a neurodiversity studies perspective. This will be rooted in sociological exploration and what has been previously labeled as Intersectional storytelling (Toft et al., 2020). Put simply, the article will foreground the voices of the participants, allowing their expertise to guide the thematic findings and discussion. This will be framed by an understanding of autism as difference as opposed to deficit. Taking this into consideration, the article aims to explore three main aspects: how the participants understood bisexuality, how being autistic impacted upon their lives, and how they understood the intersection of bisexuality and autism. These aspects are detailed further in the *Findings* section and the article overview below, however, the focus throughout is upon teasing out connections and meanings that the participants made or explored between bisexuality and autism.

The article begins by giving an overview of the research landscape in which it resides. As will become clear, very little research exists which has separated bisexuality from LGBT+ lives when exploring autism. However, emerging research on autism, disability and LGBT+ identities is useful in highlighting some of the broader challenges. The methodology used will then be detailed. Although the collaborative aspect of the project has been detailed in depth elsewhere (Toft et al., 2022), it is important to give a concise and accurate overview, particularly with regards to how the dataset used in this article relates to previous datasets. There will also be more

detail provided on the epistemological framework used, including information on the authorship of the article and the language used throughout. The findings section presents three main sections which tease out the connection between autism and bisexuality. Firstly, in *Bisexuality in young autistic lives* there is an exploration of how the participants understood and applied bisexuality to their lives. Here the focus is upon how it was used, how they found it useful, and what its strengths and limitations are. Second, in *Autistic perspectives on sexual identity*, the focus shifts to understanding how autism manifests or impacts in the participants lives, paying particular attention to how this relates to sexuality. The final findings sub-section, *Autistic bisexual connections*, works to understand the connections between the two and to explore how bisexuality is often a useful tool for the participants.

The article concludes by returning to the over-arching questions posed by the article which include: 1- What work do young autistic bisexual people do in order to negotiate their identities? 2- Is bisexuality a useful label for autistic young people? 3- How does autism challenge and disrupt fragile concepts such as bisexuality?

## Research landscape

This article is presented in a style where the findings section contains the lived experiences of the participants (the data) alongside analysis and discussion of existing research. The Group (see *Method*) and author felt that this approach would be most impactful whilst being clear and relevant. However, it is important to give a sense of where this research resides, and this is the focus of this section.

There is a high degree of contention with regards to sexuality and gender in the lives of autistic people. This is often due to the prevalence of deficit-based research which works to understand what is wrong or missing from an autistic person's make-up which leads to a specific sexuality. This article rejects this approach as it is based upon out-dated thinking which does not engage with autistic people themselves (see Evans, 2013). As a result, it is important to give an overview of the research themes that the current project touches upon. This is not a comprehensive or systematic review but provides a sense of the current state of research.

No literature could be found that has solely explored bisexuality and autism, where bisexuality is understood in its modern sense. Database searching will reveal the psychoanalytical work of Houzel (2005). However, this work refers to bisexuality as two-sexes (using a very literal interpretation of the word) and sees autism as a state which does not reflect a persons' true self. Such work can be dismissed as irrelevant here.

The research landscape in which this research resides then, is made up of work which is focused upon marginalized sexuality and/or gender,

where bisexuality is occasionally pulled out from the LGBT grouping. There has also been a focus upon understanding autism and what is ‘wrong’ with autistic people which leads to higher rates of LGBT + identification, demonizing both autism and marginalized sexualities and gender identities, as previously noted. More contemporary research has seen a shift in this approach. This has coincided with the rise of Neurodiversity Studies, within which this article relates. This rise has signaled a shift toward research which attempts to focus on the lived experiences of autistic people and understand autism as difference rather than deficit (see *Framework* for more information). This has resulted in research that has explored how identity is done in autistic LGBT+ lives (Hillier et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2021), the importance of community in supporting identity (McAuliffe et al., 2022; Womack et al., 2022), the need to provide specific sex education for autistic young people (Herrick & Datti, 2022), and health disparities (Hall et al., 2020). Alongside this there have been important theoretical and conceptual advances (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2021; Jackson-Perry, 2020).

The research with regards to gender identity and autism has increased significantly over recent years, and this has been separated out from any LGBT groupings. The research in this area is vast and cuts across many disciplines and interests including working to show a link between being transgender and autistic (Warrier et al., 2020), links with depression (Murphy et al., 2020), intersectional work (Cain & Velasco, 2021), important autistic person-led work highlighting best practice (Milton et al., 2021), and in line with the current project, research that explores how autistic people disrupt gender norms (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019). Yet, as will be explored throughout this article, examining such intersections often results in damaging research and assertions that the participants are not really autistic (see Fortunato et al., 2022).

A handful of articles have separated bisexuality from LGBT+ groupings within their analysis; often comparing autistic and non-autistic populations. George and Stokes (2018) for example, found that autistic people were more likely to be bisexual than non-autistic people. Pecora et al. (2020) compared autistic bisexual women and non-autistic heterosexual women, and found that autistic bisexual women were less likely to report regrettable sexual behaviors and were less likely to attract unwanted sexual advances. The authors suggest this contradicts previous research which suggests bisexual women are more likely to be victimized. Khudiakova and Chasteen (2022) found that erasure of both autism and bisexuality was present because they were not always visible to others. Additionally, they reported that participants experienced people making assumptions that they could not be bisexual because they were autistic.

## Methodology

### *Method*

This article reports on the a project that was an extension (or sub-project) of the Under the Double Rainbow Project, a collaborative co-produced online project that was developed by Toft and the Young Disabled LGBT + Researchers Group (the Group). The decision to work collaboratively, and beyond traditional methods, was taken because of the difficult history of autism research, where what autism has been determined by neurotypicals (Evans, 2013). It is clear that the majority of research that focusses upon autistic people does not involve autistic people in the research process (see Chown et al., 2017; Evans, 2013). As a group, we felt it was important to work to redress this balance, in line with other emerging research (Botha & Cage, 2022). A full description of the Group's working has been detailed elsewhere (Toft et al., 2022), but it is important to give an overview here and provide insight into the process and the materials produced.

In 2019 Toft set up an online group of researchers. The purpose of the Group was to come together in a shared space and work on constructing and conducting research together. Using group and one-to-one meetings for those who preferred, we worked together to construct a research project that the Group felt was important, including the aims and objectives. We continued to meet on a monthly basis to develop the research materials, spending most time on developing interview schedules and the diary instructions. The interviews were conducted online by Toft as this was not something the Group wanted to pursue. All interviews followed a precise structure and focused upon the following five things: identity, relationships, sensory lives, perceptions, making things better; aspects of life that the Group had identified as being the most important to understand. The interviews used pre-formed questions prepared by the Group and were quite structured in this regard. The Group felt that for autistic participants this would be important and would ensure that questions were clear and not open to misinterpretation. The interviews also had space for probes and encouraged the participants to develop their stories and experiences further, while helping to create a relaxed and conversational atmosphere. Participants were given a sense of the interviews beforehand to help alleviate anxiety. Following the interviews, the participants were invited to complete a personal diary to reflect upon issues raised in the interviews and to reflect upon their everyday experiences of the five areas detailed above. The diaries gave the participants the freedom and space to reflect in their own time and on their own terms. Diaries were popular and produced important reflections across the research areas.

Following data collection we worked together to analyze the data performing a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) across a number of online meetings. We have since been working to write together (Toft et al., 2022) or in a fashion where the Group act as advisors, such as with the current article. Although this article has not been written collaboratively with the Group, they have offered some suggestions about what they thought was important, particularly with regards to the presentation of the article:

1. That the language used is clear and not open to interpretation.
2. That the structure is logical and explained.
3. That the sections had clear messages that would be useful for people in everyday life.

In addition, the Group offered thoughts on the focus of the article and the use of the themes that they had defined. As a result of these suggestions, the article may be somewhat different to traditional pieces. Although the article is clearly academically focused, I thank the editor and reviewers for considering an article that is a slight variation on the standard.

### **Data sets**

This article reports on findings from the Under the Double Rainbow project. The original dataset consisted of 15 participants who were young (16–25), autistic and LGBT+. Of these, six were bisexual (Ben, Steven, Deckard, Albert, Dennis and Helen). After the initial Group analysis it was clear that bisexual participants' stories were distinct and the negotiations faced were unique. As a result, Toft recruited four more participants who were 16–25, autistic and bisexual (Hester, Alani, Riley and Leaf). These additional participants took part in the same interview, and the analysis process was the same, albeit the themes had begun to take shape from the first six participants. As a result of this, data was collected *via* interviews (10 completed interviews) and diaries (8; Steven and Helen did not complete a diary). Although 10 participants appears to be a small data set, each interview was at least 90 min long and participants kept diaries for around one month. As a result, the data collected was very detailed and reflective.

### **Participants**

The ten participants were all autistic (eight has received a diagnosis, one was currently seeking a diagnosis and one was self-identifying) and aged between 16–25 years.

They all used bisexual to describe their sexuality to some extent, but only three used bisexual exclusively (Albert, Dennis, Leaf). Ben, Steven, Hester, Alani and Riley identified as queer/bi. Deckard was also included as they felt that bisexuality as a part of her evolving identity. Helen used bisexual/pansexual. In addition to autism one participant had a learning disability, one a mobility impairment and one noted mental health. Participants were all English and described their ethnicities as white (4), black (2), Asian (Chinese) (2), South Asian (1) and New Zealand (1).

Participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms if they wanted to. If they preferred not to, gender relevant names have been assigned. During the findings, pseudonyms are presented after quotations alongside pronouns and the method of data collection. Where relevant, any other intersections and identities have been noted.

### **Framework**

This article is guided by emerging Neurodiversity theory. This has been succinctly summarized thusly:

Neurodiversity theory proposes that divergence from expected functioning (such as autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder [ADHD], developmental coordination disorder, or dyslexia) are natural variations of human minds, and those who diverge from the norm (neurominorities) are equally deserving of dignity, respect, and accommodation. (Chapman & Botha, 2023)

Taking the lead from activists from the 1990s, this approach works to embrace the label of disability (and in turn autism) and to reject medicalised models of illness or deficit (see Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2020; Chapman & Botha, 2023). Such an approach aims to value the expertise of autistic people themselves and question the prevailing but out-dated stereotypes that are proliferated by non-autistic experts (see Walker, 2014), which has resulted in autism being defined with no guidance from autistic people themselves (Evans, 2013; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017).

In terms of exploring gender and sexuality, this has been developed in a number of directions. Jackson-Perry (2020) has highlighted the potential to learn more about gender and sexuality through autism, in line with Jack's (2012), theorization that existing models of sexuality and gender as exclusory toward neurodivergency. Walker on the other hand, proposed exploration by examining the entanglement of autism and queerness with their idea of neuroqueer, which recognizes 'gender-fluidity and neurofluidity as being entwined and as synergistically interacting with one another' (Walker and Raymaker (2021)). The lenses of Autigender/autisexual (see Valvano & Shelton, 2021) have also provided an emerging way of potentially exploring neurodivergence and gender/sexuality. Autigender/autisexual



have been used to demonstrate how sexuality or gender is inseparable from autism because life for autistic people is always filtered through autism, and this would include sexuality and/or gender identity. This article takes this neurodiversity-led approach alongside a method of presentation/analysis that has previously been called Intersectional Storytelling (Toft et al., 2020). In practice this means ensuring that the voices of the participants guide the article and that their intersectional stories are valued as the leading expertise.

This framework, and the importance of being guided by the Group, is also reflected in the language used throughout. As a result, identity first (autistic person) is used throughout. The Group felt that person first language (person with autism) was patronizing and made them sound unwell. Although this point has been subjected to considerable debate (for example see Bertilsdotter Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2021), the author, whilst also agreeing with the Group, felt it important that their expertise is valued. The title of the article refers to bisexuality. In practice the participants used bisexual or pansexual, where relevant, any difference of understanding will be examined throughout the article. As will be clear throughout, bisexuality was not the only identity used by the participants.

### ***Ethical statement***

All aspects of the Group work and the research project itself was approved by Nottingham Trent School Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

### **Findings: negotiating bisexuality and autism**

This main finding section works to untangle the connections and intersections of bisexuality and autism. It will explore how bisexuality worked or was used in the participants lives, how autism impacted upon their understanding of sexual identity, and then move to understand why bisexuality remains an important identity.

### ***Bisexuality in young autistic lives***

This sub-section will explore how bisexuality was understood and used in the participants lives. It will be suggested that there are three main reasons for adopting a bisexual identity relating to: fitting closely enough with their lives, combining with other identities, and a method to show how gender was not important in their romantic lives.

The label of bisexuality was adopted by the participants in this research project not because it was an ideal label which captured their lives or experiences, but because it was a useful tool that was often close enough to how they felt. Indeed, the participants struggled with bisexuality as a concept and were reluctant to use bisexuality as a sole identity. Queer, however, was seen as a powerful and important identity because of its flexibility and fluidity in describing their sexuality and gender to some extent. As Riley (he/him, interview) noted, 'queerness is the most useful because it doesn't tie anything down, it can all shift around'. Here the 'shifting' is moving freely among established identities without ever settling on one, in an entirely positive fashion which reflected their lives. Indeed for some, queer was extremely powerful because it allowed them to reject social constructions of sexuality and gender that they did not understand or value. Bisexuality was often used alongside queerness by the participants to present a fuller picture. This was well summarized by Hester when considering why they identified as bisexual:

I do use bisexual, I have done for a while. I mainly use queer bisexual. It vaguely fits with who I am. It would give people a good over overview of who I am I think. (Hester, she/her, interview)

Although the above quotation highlights how bisexuality was an important aspect of their identity, bisexuality was overall seen as being inadequate to fully describe the participants lives and experiences. As a result, participants combined or stacked identities to attempt to construct a fuller picture of themselves. Rather than working to define or reinvent bisexuality on their own terms, the participants saw such bisexuality as a rigid and immovable category. Unlike some previous research which has celebrated the flexibility of bisexuality and the individuality it can afford (see Ross et al., 2012), with a variety of understandings/definitions (Flanders et al., 2017), here the emphasis was upon recognizing the limitations of bisexuality and addressing this through identity combinations. In this regard, for some of the participants bisexuality was not used for anything relating to gender identity. Bisexuality was reserved as a descriptor for attraction and behavior, whilst 'queer' did the work for describing gender identity.

I would say queer and bisexual, I think. I don't like to say male or female and my relationships are with people of any gender [laughs], so I think queer bisexual says it perfectly really. (Alani, she/her, interview)

As these stories show, bisexuality in some cases was not seen as being able to fully describe the participants sexual and gendered lives, yet all the participants talked about the importance of using bisexual to describe themselves. Analysis of the diaries in particular highlights how bisexuality was important in making sense of sexual lives and relationships, sometimes

in relation to partners and their genders. During their diary-keeping, Riley explored this in relation to their relationships:

I was thinking about describing my relationships today and the people in them (including me of course). I settled on bisexual because I don't limit myself or my partners. So if I use bisexual I am not assuming things about partners and their pronouns. (Riley, he/him, diary)

For Riley bisexuality was useful because it didn't make any presumptions about them or their partners. Bisexuality in this regard was a way of describing relationships that are not reliant upon gender (Gustavson, 2009; Cipriano et al., 2022), and was a central and important component of their identity.

To summarize, bisexuality was used in a number of ways by the participants:

1. As an adequate fit. An identity that was not correct but went some way to describe their lives. Often being 'close enough'.
2. As a combination identity to fit with other identities, in order to present a fuller picture of themselves.
3. As a useful tool to show how they weren't reliant upon gender in relationships.

### ***Autistic perspectives on sexual identities***

Having explored how the participants understood and used bisexuality in their lives, this section moves to investigate the views of the participants on sexual identities as a whole. It explores some of the ways that being autistic impacted upon the young participants lives in relation to issues regarding sexual identity.

It is clear that a number of assertions about autism have become outdated and have proven to be unfounded. One such example are deep-rooted beliefs about autism and empathy which Milton (2012, 2017) showed to be inaccurate with the Double Empathy Problem. Such work has shown that it is often important to consider the difficulties presented by society, rather than stigmatizing or blaming autistic people. The lived experiences of the participants in this research do show how aspects of social life are challenging, but this is because everyday life is generally not supportive toward neurodivergence. This can result in misunderstandings about what behaviors are expected in certain situations (see Sperry & Mesibov, 2005). Yet rather than working to make spaces accessible, the focus again is upon changing the autistic person. As a result, a plethora of interventions or programmes have been introduced to support autistic people navigate social life (see Gray & Garand, 1993, Gray, 1995 for work

on Social Stories, a programme to teach social navigation through narratives). Dennis, during his diary discussed this aspect in terms of his working life:

Today I was talking to [NAME] about when I first started. It was really interesting because I still am uncertain about things I think. He reminds me about doing certain things and what needs to be done. It's done in a really lovely way though, I'm grateful when he helps me out, because he realises I think differently and things aren't set up properly. (Dennis, he/him, diary)

Dennis' reflections highlight the difficulties he faced in accessing seemingly inaccessible spaces. In many ways he struggled to understand aspects of working life that his coworker would have seen as social norms. Research has highlighted the challenges faced by autistic people in recognizing such norms, particular in relation to gender (Seers & Hogg, 2021). In the current project this extended to expectations surrounding clothing. Leaf, during their diary explored how their clothing had become a daily challenge:

I found picking my clothes today exhausting and confusing. I just feel like I'm missing out on something, like I should know what to do, but I don't. In the end I went for what I wanted to wear and what was comfy. I do see other people's clothes but I can't place them on me. (Leaf, she/they Diary)

Leaf overcame such anxieties by focusing upon what felt right for them, even when this was at odds with what they thought they should do. The participants extended this thinking to sexual identity, as they found understanding prescribed models of sexuality challenging. However, this is not to be considered a negative as the participants found it freeing and just part of being autistic. How sexuality and gender identity is experienced for autistic young people is different from those who are neurotypical. Autism by its very nature means that lived experiences are filtered through it and they are affected by it. With regards to sexuality, researchers have attempted to create language to explain the connection. Walker (2014) coined 'Neuroqueer' as a way of thinking about 'being both neurodivergent and queer, with some degree of conscious awareness and/or active exploration around how these two aspects of one's being entwine and interact (or are, perhaps, mutually constitutive and inseparable)'. (No page). More recently the terms autisexual or autigender have been used to describe this intertwining and how it makes little sense to think that sexuality or gender would not be affected by autism (Volvano & Shelton, 2021). Jack (2012) in an important theoretical piece went as far as suggesting that autistic sexuality/gender should be considered distinctly as constructions of sexuality/gender are ableist and autistic people do not and should not fit with these existing definitions.

The participants in the current research show how sexual identities are often meaningless concepts. It was suggested that being autistic means they do not recognize such social constructions and that sexuality is a fragile concept open to challenge. This is summarized by Ben. I quote at length to explain this important concept:

I think maybe the reason you might find more autistic people being open about being queer or LGBT, is because maybe they don't see those lines, or find them important. There is that whole thing of it not being socially acceptable, things like that, I think that sometimes, not caring about that is how you find more people to be more open about it. A lot of autistic people don't care or don't know, or don't mind about what is socially acceptable. I think maybe it might be more easy in some ways, and this is just from my experience, other people might find it different, I understand that, maybe being autistic makes it easier to find out and be open about that. (Ben, they/them, interview)

There is a lot to unpack in this quotation which effectively summarizes the entire section and one of the main findings from this research. Ben argues that they struggle to see the boundaries in social life in terms of what is deemed acceptable. They suggest that autistic people simply don't care, don't know or don't mind. As a result, they are able to effectively override what they are supposed to do by doing what feels natural to them. As research has recently shown, autistic people do gender based upon what feels normal to them (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019), which often results in a more fluid gender identity. The participants of the current research suggested sexuality was a social norm that they did not see or feel the need to adhere to. Indeed, as Helen argues, in the quotation used for this article's title, the participants suggested such social norms are fabricated constructions which don't make sense to autistic people:

These made-up things mean nothing to me. They just don't. I don't understand and I don't care, I don't think I need to. People have been telling me I should, these things are important, we need to follow them, that's what they say to me. You know, I just can't follow what it means when people talk about what my relationships need to be. (Helen, she/her, interview).

To summarize, the participants felt that autism often means that social norms, identities or the boundaries between these are often difficult for autistic people to see. This was not seen as a negative situation however, as it was suggested that this was simply the way that autism worked for them. The result is that sexual identities are more fluid and flexible, but also more difficult to describe. As noted in the first section, the participants often had to 'stack' identities in order to create a fuller picture. Some young autistic people have abandoned such a project, opting to use the term queer to describe themselves. However, for some bisexual was still an important term, and this will be explored in the next section.

### ***Autistic bisexual connections***

Having explored how sexual identities are perhaps less important or at least less rigid for young autistic people. This section moves to explore why bisexuality remains important for some, focusing specifically on the original findings of the current project. Put simply, what is it about bisexuality that was more welcoming to autistic young people compared to other labels, and what are the connections between autism and bisexuality?

There are a number of similarities between autism research and bisexuality research, most striking being the fact that they are both preoccupied with definitions. Any article discussing bisexuality will likely focus upon definition to some extent (this list is vast but some important articles include Flanders et al., 2017; Halperin, 2009; Rust, 2000). Similarly, research exploring autism, dominated by medical deficit-based research (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022) is over-shadowed by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM V) which positions autism as a neurodevelopment disorder based around deficits with regards to social communication and interaction, social-emotional reciprocity, and communication; restrictive/repetitive behavior; and sensitivity to input (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Due to the dominance and acceptance of this, research has been less interested in the voices of actual autistic people and their lived experiences. There is a tendency to create all-encompassing definitions which result in missing nuance and fail to capture individual experience. The experts are the people whose lives are being researched and this approach has much to tell us about society and the negotiations that take place.

The lives of the participants show alignment between autism and bisexuality. Specifically, there were three interconnecting alignments:

1. That bisexuality and autism are connected because they challenge conceptions of gender- particularly reflected in relationships.
2. That bisexuality and autism are often not visible, either purposefully or otherwise. Such invisibility leads to invalidation and assertions that you are not bisexual or autistic 'enough'.
3. Unlike disability, which is often de-sexualised, autism is often hypersexualised, mainly because of preconceptions about touch. Bisexuality aligns clearly here as an identity that is hypersexualised with discourses surrounding greed. (Hayfield et al., 2014)

Hester was a 20-year-old cisgender woman who identified as queer/bisexual. She was currently in a relationship with a cisgender woman who identified as a lesbian; her partner was also autistic. Hester spent time during the interview exploring the possible connections between bisexuality

and autism, particularly with regards to negotiating and understanding gender. When considering the connection, she told the story of an encounter she had with someone at the University LGBT society:

It was a whole definitions type of chat, it was in the LGBT society so it was all fine. They didn't know much about autism though, we'll forgive them, I think they just wanted to know. But it made me think, they were asking if autism made me bisexual. I just froze. I wish I had just said no straight away and then give a clever answer like it makes it easier and makes it make more sense. I don't get gender and neither does bisexuality. (Hester, she/her, interview)

This is a powerful statement. Although there are no grounds for the argument that bisexuality (or any LGBT+ identity) is a result of autism (Toft et al., 2020a; Toft, 2023), for Hester, the connection was a shared disruption of normative understandings of gender. Both bisexuality, in its challenge to gender in terms of relationships and attraction (see Toft, 2020) and autism in its challenge to accepting prescribed gender models (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019).

Leaf was a 22-year old cisgender woman. She identified as Black British and bisexual. Leaf's pronouns were she/they, reflecting how she did not consider herself non-binary but she felt that 'she' did not effectively capture her identity entirely, although she was happy to be referred to by either pronoun. Connected to this, Leaf's story was full of instances of when she felt identity was invisible and even invalidated. Leaf felt that because bisexuality was not always obvious, and that being autistic was not always known, these aspects of her were seen as being less real:

People don't see me as me, and that can be hard sometimes. I don't think everyone would know I'm autistic. I don't wear a t-shirt telling everyone, and I don't wear a bisexual t-shirt either (laughs)...but it does frustrate me, especially when it seems like they are questioning me. (Leaf, she/they, interview)

Relationships are often not read as being bisexual (Lee, 2020). Indeed, as Hayfield et al. (2018) have noted, bisexuality disappears within relationships. There is the assumption here that unless there is a visible display of bisexuality (perhaps by having multiple partners), such relationships are not bisexual enough. For young people who are also autistic, this is additionally difficult as their experiences of navigating autism may be similar. Most of the participants during the interviews discussed situations where seen as not being autistic enough. Deckard in their interview expressed caution when telling other autistic people about being autistic because they felt they might be judged. This led to Deckard masking (or camouflaging) behaviors that might be interpreted as autistic, for fear of confrontation. This masking could also put Deckard at greater risk of burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020).

Invisibility leads to assertions about validity. As Leaf noted, questions were asked about the affect of autism on bisexuality and vice-versa. Concerns are valid, and this is shown by research which has been dismissive of trans autistic people's diagnoses, suggesting that autistic traits are a symptom of gender dysphoria (Fortunato et al., 2022). However, the current project highlighted dismissive attitudes in the opposite direction, e.g., the effect of autism on bisexuality. A number of the participants discussed how their parents often attributed their sexuality to being autistic. This is in line with the work of Khudiakova and Chasteen (2022), who suggested that in general bisexuality is often seen as a result of autism by others.

Albert was an 18-year-old cisgender man. He described his sexuality as bisexual and his ethnicity as White British. He also noted during the interview that he had what he called a mild learning disability which meant he 'occasionally struggles to understand what some things mean'. Albert made a link between the intersection of autism and bisexuality and what he called being perceived as 'over-sexual':

I go to a group [a disability support group] and we talk about what you should do if you like people. It was helpful. My boyfriend kept saying to me that I'd go with anyone. It wasn't nice at all. I didn't like that. I think that is what people might think about me though. (Albert, he/him, interview)

Albert's interaction with his boyfriend reveals a commonality between perceptions about both autistic and bisexual sexuality, or more precisely sexual behavior; the assumption of being overly or even hyper-sexual. Unlike disabled people who are seen as being non-sexual (see Santinele Martino, 2017; Toft et al., 2020), autistic people are hypersexualised because of preconceptions about issues of touch and social interaction. Viewing bisexuals as greedy has a long research history (see the following for examples- Esterberg, 2002; Hayfield et al., 2014; Hemmings, 2002). It has been suggested that this presumption stems from bisexuality's rejection of compulsory monogamy and monosexuality (Toft & Yip, 2018). With regards to autism, the dominance of the medical model means that because autism is seen as something to be treated (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022), sexuality in autistic people will be non-normative (Fisher et al., 2015; Schöttle et al., 2017), and that this can also be medically treated (Eyuboglu et al., 2018). However, what Albert's story suggests is that supportive work is often the best approach. Sex education has often failed autistic people by not focusing upon issues that they would welcome support with, such as relationships and consent (Calabrò et al., 2022, Herrick & Datti, 2022; Toft, 2020).

This section has shown that there are commonalities in autism research and bisexuality research, particularly with regards to the desire to create



universal definitions. Furthermore, there are connections between autistic and bisexual experiences in terms of gender and how it's understood, how both can be invisible and as a result become invalidated, and how narratives of hypersexualisation remain.

## Conclusions

This article has attempted to begin untangling the intersection of autism and bisexuality by exploring the lived experiences of young autistic bisexuals. It has done this by exploring: their understanding of bisexuality as young autistic people, their experiences and engagement with sexual identities, and their understanding of how autism and bisexuality work together in terms of the connections and alignments that exist.

Bisexuality was highlighted as being a useful tool. Whilst it was often not an ideal representation of the participants' lives, it gave them a way to explain their identity by reflecting certain key aspects of themselves.

Social life is often not set-up for autistic people and as a result, the participants were less likely to understand social norms and also social constructions such as sexuality. There are strong alignments between autism and bisexuality as a result, including challenges to gender normativity, invisibility and invalidation, and hypersexualisation.

There is much to be explored in relation to this intersection and it is hoped that this article raises many additional questions. However, what appears clear is that a neurodiversity studies approach (as opposed to a medicalised deficit-approach) has much to teach us. Seeing autism as neurodivergence shows how autism filters experiences of things such as sexuality and shifts the focus onto these constructions, away from the victimization of autistic people. This has much to tell us about (bi)sexuality and dominant normative forces that operate in society.

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## Disclosure statement

No conflicts of interest declared.

## Notes on contributor

*Alex Toft, PhD*, is a Research Fellow in the Nottingham Center for Children, Young People and Families. His research interests include sexuality, gender, identity theory,

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