

Notes: This was originally submitted for consideration to Disability Studies Quarterly. However, it seems that they are going through an editorial transition. As a result, this sat on their system for 18 months without being sent for peer review.

On the 18th August 2023 I left academia and therefore could not re-submit this anywhere. I have therefore chosen to upload it to ResearchGate. At least it has a DOI now. I hope someone out there finds it useful. I am, as always, indebted to the Research Group and the participants for their hard work.

There may be mistakes in this article. I apologise for these. I hope there are no lazy slips of language. But I hope that readers will see where this article is coming from and what we (myself and the Group) were hoping to achieve.

Alex Toft

‘I used to think that everyone else had got a manual about it but I missed out’:

Navigating intimacies in the lives of young autistic LGBT+ persons

Introduction

Providing a definition of friendship remains difficult, due as noted by Jamieson (2008) to the cultural and historical variations attributed to the word. However, to some degree, friendships tend to refer to relationships in which people support each other. Goldsmith (2007) has noted that this might be through emotional support or instrumental support (helping with tasks or sharing information). Friendships are seen as vital in developing skills such as: mutual caring, emotional support, empathy, liking, intimacy, and sharing (Bauminger and Shulman 2003,

p.81). They are seen as beneficial in everyday life in terms of protecting against victimisation (Hodges et al 1999) and promoting happiness and good mental health (Demir et al, 2012; Saldarriaga et al, 2015). As friendships do not focus upon doing ‘tasks’, friendships are often seen as focussing upon enjoyment (Hays 1988). Research has sought to show how friendships protect against isolation and help to reduce anxiety (La Greca and Harrison, 2005; Wood et al, 2017). Although friendships in autistic lives are less well-researched, there is a suggestion that this aspect is also valued (see Rosetti, 2011; Foggo and Webster, 2017). However, research exploring intimacies¹ in autistic lives has worked to explore how such relationships are deficient (see Bauminger and Shulman 2003). This article does not do this. In line with emerging research within the field of Neurodiversity studies, this article will explore how friendship has been positioned as inaccessible to autistic people and that the lived experiences of young autistic LGBT+ people shows how although autistic relationships may be different, they are not deficient. In striving to show how autistic relationships are not of as high quality, it is proposed that what research has shown is that different attributes are more highly valued.

The article will begin with an overview of the research landscape in which it resides. In order to do this there will be an exploration of what research has said about autistic relationships. This will then move to examine emerging research on alternate understandings of friendships and the importance of autistic LGBT+ lives in challenging this. There will be notes upon authorship and language in order to clarify these positions. The main body of article will then present two thematic sections which emerged from the data that shed light on the nature of intimacies in the participants lives. Firstly, in *Navigating Friendships* the article will explore friendships and their importance in the participants lives, focussing upon how they work in everyday life and a need for a more holistic approach to understanding

¹ The use of intimacy here and throughout refers to the close connection of people and the maintenance of this connection in line with the work of Jamieson (2011). Intimate relationships is therefore used to talk about what might traditionally be called friendships and romantic relationships.

friendship. Second, in *Negotiating Intimate Relationships* the article explores more intimate relationships, focussing upon the challenges and negotiations enacted in order to successfully navigate these. The article concludes by highlighting the key messages emerging from the research.

Notes on authorship

The project from which this data is taken was conducted collaboratively with the Young Disabled LGBT+ Researchers Group². All aspects of the project, including all research materials were constructed together with the group. This approach will be discussed further in the methodology. However, it is important to note that unlike other articles that have been written collaboratively (Toft, Ward, Anon; 2023) this article is written by Toft, and the Group have offered comments and suggestions on the finished article. The decision to produce an article focusing upon relationships was made by collaboratively. The Group noted two things in particular: First, that the structure of the article was clear and well-explained. Secondly, that the sections had clear descriptions of their contents and included summaries. This was felt to help with overall readability. There was also an emphasis placed on clear and precise language throughout.

Notes on language

The Group guided the language used throughout. All members prefer identity-first language (autistic person) and felt that ‘person with autism’ made them sound ill. There was also a consensus that LGBT+ was an adequate catch-all term to include those whose sexual and gender identities are minoritized.

² Referred to as the Group throughout.

Research landscape

Research conducted on understanding autistic intimate relationships often comes from a position of deficit. Indeed, a high proportion of research focusses upon questioning whether friendship is possible for autistic people (Bauminger and Shulman, 2003), as autistic individuals are framed as having no ability to form friends (Attwood, 1998; Happe 1994). However, Bauminger and Shulman (2003) did find that mothers felt their autistic children could form friendships with others, and research continues to show that autistic young people do desire friendship (Jackson, 2003; Lawson, 2001; 2006). However, the barrier put in place by deficit-based research with regards to autistic friendships appears to be the idea that friendship requires emotional engagement between people and that autistic people are not able to achieve this (Baron-Cohen, 1991; Hobson, 2005). Research such as this has suggested that autistic people find forming relationships difficult because there are pre-requisites of friendships that autistic people do not have access to. Autistic people are understood as being social-emotional deficient and have difficulty in processing the thoughts/feelings of other (e.g., theory of mind), which makes friendships difficult (Bauminger and Shulman, 2003). Put simply, much research has dismissed autistic friendships because they do not match our expectations of what friendships look like. An important systematic review (Petrina et al 2014) highlighted how autistic people have fewer friends, meet them less frequently and are focussed upon completing tasks and activities together rather than engaging in emotional work. Thus, continuing to present a picture of autistic people as loners (Whitehouse et al, 2009) with relationships that are less high quality than those who are neurotypical.

It is clear however, that the focus upon deficiency of relationships has been to the exclusion of any consideration of difference. The emergence of Neurodiversity studies (see Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Chown and Steming, 2020) has been instrumental in shifting this. Brownlow et al (2015) in a short but important article challenged what is understood by the

concept of friendship. As emotions have been characterised as vital for forming and maintaining relationships (see Kasari et al 2011), much of the literature has focussed upon suggesting that friendships are not accessible to autistic people. As Brownlow et al (2015) state:

Implicit within this approach are assumptions about emotional expression, which are naturalised and are drawn into measurements of appropriate friendships against which people with autism are seen as deficient. (p. 190)

Brownlow et al's (2015) proposal is that there needs to be an alternate understanding of (autistic) friendships 'that does not necessarily rely on neurotypical definitions and expectations surrounding the concept of what it means to be a friend' (p. 191). Brownlow et al (2015) argue that this proposition comes from a history of support that has been ineffective and unethical, including training autistic people to develop social skills and be more like neurotypical people. Additionally, the lens through which friendships are examined has been too rigid and more consideration needs to be given to online life including friendships via online forums (Brownlow, 1997) and email (Lawson, 2006). Recently, Sala, Hooley and Stokes (2020) have highlighted alternatives to social-emotional ties, suggesting that intimate relationships for autistic people are often built upon 'communication, sharing and similarity, respect and safety for self and other, and working on the relationship' (p. 4133). Ryan et al (2021), have also suggested that shared interests are often the basis for forming friendships (this is echoed by Yew et al, 2021), refuting previous evidence that suggested friendships for autistic people tend to develop in pre-arranged settings (Orsmond, Krauss and Seltzer, 2004). The authors also challenge the use of the ADI-R (Autism Diagnostic Interview - Revised) in relation to friendship, questioning the validity of the four categories: being a similar age, taking part in a variety of activities outside of pre-arranged settings, reciprocity and mutual responsiveness (adapted from Lord, Rutter and LeCouter, 1994). The authors point out that

although such criteria may not be fulfilled 'it may be [that] the friendships of children with ASD meet social and emotional needs through enjoyable companionship, without necessarily fulfilling all of the criteria of close friendship such as intimacy and affection...' (Ryan et al, 2021: 394).

Differences in how friendships work for autistic and non-autistic people may lead to conflict within relationships, and this has been explored recently by Lewis (2022). By exploring relationships containing autistic and non-autistic persons' Lewis (2022) highlighted the importance of the non-autistic partner understanding autism. If autism is pathologized it is often the blaming factor in relationship difficulties, however, 'those in the mutual partnership context described relationships characterized by equality, gratitude, and a joint commitment to meeting both partner's needs.' (Lewis, 2002:8)

The majority of research exploring intimacies and autistic LGBT+ lives has focussed upon the prevalence of LGBT+ identities in their lives (Dewinter et al. 2015 and Dewinter et al. 2017)). As with the wider research on friendship, this is largely due to the preoccupation with whether autistic people desire such relationships. However, research has shown that such intimacies are desired (Hancock, Stokes and Mesibov, 2019), although those who are LGBT+ experience different challenges because they belong to two groups that are marginalised by society (George and Stokes, 2018). Relatively little research exists concerning LGBT+ intimacies in everyday life for autistic people. However, the work of Hogan and Miccusi (2020) is a notable exception. Although the authors do not focus specifically on how autistic relationships are different, they highlight important challenges in relationships that illuminate such differences. The authors note the importance of considering: communication differences (such as non-verbal cues), sensory sensitivities (touch, texture, sound), meeting people (incompatibility with bars/clubs), loneliness (due to

communication issues), disconnection from LGBTQ communities, issues relating to integrating identities and an overall lack of support.

The emerging literature clearly shows a move towards understanding autistic relationships as different as opposed to inferior or in need to fixing, and has worked to suggest ways of understanding relationships more holistically. It is within this research landscape that the current project takes place.

Methodology

This article uses data from a collaborative project entitled Under the Double Rainbow conducted by Toft and the Young Disabled LGBT+ Researchers Group. In 2019 Toft set up the Group to work together to understand what research needed doing in the area of disability and sexuality/gender identity, and to then construct a research project to tackle some of the important issues. This involved designing and constructing all aspects of the project (e.g., research questions, aims, research tools, interview schedules, dissemination materials). Every decision about the research was a collaboration. We have written more detail about the process of the Group and the method we used elsewhere (Toft, Ward, Anon; 2022). It is important here however, to give a concise overview of the overall methods used and also more upon the use of diaries, which proved to be very useful for collecting information about relationships.

This article uses data collected via interviews and diaries. Interviews were semi-structured as it was important to ensure that questions were clear and unambiguous. We worked together to ensure that questions were accessible but could be followed with prompts, as this would be clearer for the participants who would need precise questions that would not be open to interpretation. This balance was key to getting detailed lived experiences. After completing the interview, participants were asked if they would like to keep a daily diary for

a period of ideally a month. Diary keepers were given instructions about what to focus upon when keeping their diaries. The diaries provided an opportunity to focus upon some of the issues highlighted during the interviews but also gave the participants the space to reflect on aspects of everyday life that touched upon being young, autistic and LGBT+.

It is true that diaries are still viewed as marginal method of social research. This has not changed since Robinson's (1985) critique in terms of engagement and reliability. However, there are a number of benefits of diaries that were taken into consideration alongside the Group's feeling that diaries would give people time to reflect rather than demanding answers on the spot. The Group felt that this was important for autistic young people, who may feel anxious during a formal interview setting. Diaries are very useful in understanding complex lived experience including LGBTQ lives (Kenten 2010). They are also prepared from perspective of the author who has full control over how they want to tell their story (Worth, 2009). The information sheet about the diary was not prescriptive about how to present the diary and although text was used by all, this was presented in a number of ways, from traditional dated entries to random thoughts at key points throughout the day. This highlights one way in which the diarists had control over their stories. Of course, this highlights a common problem within diary research, responses are often varied making comparison difficult (Jacelon and Imperio, 2005). This aspect did not prove to be a concern in the current research, as the variation was seen in presentation rather than the content.

Participants were recruited via advertisement on social media, contacting key networks who advertised the research (REGARD, Stonewall and a number of regional LGBT+ groups including Birmingham LGBT), and using existing gatekeepers established by Toft through ongoing research. 15 participants were recruited from throughout the UK of which 13 took part in interviews. Of these 13, 8 also completed diaries. Five people took part in interview only and two people completed diaries only.

The participants were aged between 16 and 22. There were four cis women, three cis men, two trans women, one trans man and five non-binary participants. The participants described their sexualities as: lesbian (3), queer (4), asexual (2), gay (2), bisexual (3) and one diary-only participant did not specify beyond LGBT+. All of the participants were autistic with two seeking a diagnosis and one self-identifying. Some of the participants had other impairments, one described themselves as being disabled (learning impairment), one also had a diagnosis of ADHD, one participant was a wheelchair user, one diary-only participant described themselves as having a speech impediment, and two participants had depression. The participants self-described their ethnicity as: White British (7), Asian (2), South Asian (2), Black (2), New Zealand (2).

Once the interviews and diaries were complete, [NONE] transcribed them verbatim and grouped the data in five categories: identity, relationships, sensory and social lives, perceptions and how to make things better. These were the five areas that the Group had identified as being most in need of investigation. We then worked together during a series of group or one-to-one online sessions to make sense of the data. Similar to Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestions, we read the grouped transcripts together to understand the key messages. We then worked to organise the key messages into themes and then explored what these were telling us about the participants' lived experiences. By the end of this multi-staged process we had a clear picture of the participants' stories, the key messages and had quotations to support the narratives.

The stories of the participants guide the article. Although we wanted to focus upon relationships in general, the stories of the participants guided the focus upon friendships and the negotiation of intimate relationships. Elsewhere this approach has been referred to as Intersectional Story-telling (Toft et al, 2020). Guided by Plummer (1995) this attempts to present the participants' intersectional lived experience by centralising their voices.

This article is written from a neurodiversity studies perspective (see Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Chown and Steming, 2020). Put simply, this refers to the assertion that autism is neurological difference and not a deficiency. With regards to LGBT+ lives the work of Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry (2021) and Jackson-Perry (2020) has been important in shifting the emphasis towards difference and recognising that autism challenges normative understandings of sexuality and gender identity.

Ethical statement

All aspects of the Group work and the project itself have been approved by the Nottingham Trent University Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BLSS REC). Participants have consented to the publication of their data.

Findings

The article presents two main thematic findings that relate to intimate relationships in the lives of young autistic LGBT+ persons, *Navigating Friendships* and *Negotiating Intimate Relationships*. Taken as a whole, these sections will shed light upon the importance of intimate relationships, how friendships are managed and how they are different to intimate relationships, and what autistic LGBT+ intimacies look like from a position of difference (as opposed to deficit). Throughout, the article reflects upon these themes in relation to existing literature and what this means for young autistic LGBT+ people.

Navigating friendships

This section will explore how the participants navigated their friendships. Specifically, it will do two main things:

- 1- Explore how the participants understood their friendships

2- Explore why friendships were seen as the most important type of relationship in their lives, focussing upon flexibility.

Understanding friendships

I went to [Name] house and it felt like a treat because of what was going on. We just watched TV together and spent time together. (Bailey- she/her- Diary)

[NAME] streamed for twelve hours straight, and I watched for most of it in between work and stuff. We all talked in the chat about mental health, and there was no toxic positivity or anything. Just a celebration of life whilst still acknowledging the dark. I feel really lucky to have a friend like him, and I was also able to donate a bit of money, although I'm still broke. He never treats me like talking to me is a work of charity, or that he's just doing it to humour me, like a lot of people who I talked to when I worked at the theatre did. (Parker- they/them- Diary)

These two quotations are taken from diary entries supplied by the participants which proved to be very important when exploring intimacies. Since this research project took place during the Coronavirus pandemic, friendships were distanced and maintained through technology (WhatsApp, Zoom, Teams etc), with face-to-face interaction being rare. However, as highlighted by Brownlow (2015), online relationships were seen as being as 'real' as face-to-face interaction. Although this was through necessity here, online life was very important to the participants and there was no real distinction made between the two.

This data highlights the importance of spending time with others, and specifically friends, for extended periods during the pandemic. Another participant, Albert, revealed in their diary how they had been spending extended time alone. Although, this was not framed negatively, doing things with others was valued by Albert:

I spent this morning working on my laptop. I didn't do anything important really. This afternoon [NAME] came over and we played games together and [NAME] cooked, which is always a bonus! (Albert- he/him- Diary)

Doing things together highlighted the importance of having shared interests in maintaining friendships (Carrington et al 2003). For many this revolved around online communities for fans of particular television, games or films. Deckard, during their interview discussed their involvement in a message board for the TV show 'Sherlock' which acted as a platform to talk about shared interests and make friends with likeminded individuals. Companionship and doing things together where there is a shared interest, were the two most important aspects of friendship for the participants. It is interesting to note that this conceptualisation of friendship has been disputed. Kuo et al (2011), for example, highlighted how mothers did not consider this to be real friendship because there was no emotional exchange occurring. However, the findings of the current research are in line with those of Ryan et al (2021) who argued that such companionship provides the emotional support required.

Some of the assertions regarding the emotional lives of autistic people are not reflected by the participants of the current research. The literature which suggests autistic people cannot form relationships because of social-emotional difficulties is not supported by the current research. To return to Parker, there was a clear emotional investment in their relationships, and they expressed the sorrow of missing friends:

My good friend [NAME] is having a hard time. His Life Day (a day he celebrates as the anniversary of a suicide attempt) is coming up, which is always a stressful time, and he's been dealing with some problems with old clients. Seeing my friends sad, especially when we're far apart, always makes me kind of anxious. I know it's not always my responsibility but I want to be able to help. For his life day this year he's

doing a long twitch stream to raise money for Mind, which will be nice. (Parker- they/them- Diary)

This aspect of friendship has been the most contested in the research literature, with some concluding that autistic people cannot access friendship due to a lack of emotional investment or empathy towards others, which is seen as an essential requirement for friendship (see Cesaroni and Garber, 1991). However, understanding empathy in autistic lives has shifted greatly in recent years with the theory of Double Empathy (see Milton 2012, 2017) which suggests that problems with empathy arise because people have very different experiences of the world (e.g., a neurotypical person and an autistic person). Therefore, the issue is not with autistic understanding but rather the dissonance between different ways of being. This idea is important in understanding friendships and the stories of the participants support this. The participants had empathy in their lives, but it was often the case that their friendships were with other autistic people, where there was less dissonance. This point is made by Parker in a diary entry:

Cried over a Magnus Archives animatic today. The two main characters, Jon and Martin, are boyfriends, and Jon is asexual like me, and is also heavily autistic coded, and perceived as autistic by many of the fans. I see myself so strongly in both of them but especially Jon, and it means that I've invested myself in their stories a bit too strongly because I know that it likely doesn't have a happy ending for either of them. I know some autistic people struggle with empathy, and I think I do too to an extent. I find it much harder to cry over real people sometimes which always makes me feel like a bit of a monster. (Parker- they/them- Diary)

Parker is emotionally affected by characters who are autistic and asexual, people who resemble Parker in many ways. Although Parker is disturbed that they are not affected by real

life experiences that should be upsetting, in many ways this reflects the idea that empathy works in situations that resonate and for people who experience the world similarly.

Some of the participants found engaging with non-autistics challenging. In order to navigate everyday life, some adaptation or masking has to take place which can be exhausting. As Black et al (2022:23) note:

To cope with the challenges and to fit into the non-autistic world, many individuals engage in adaptive morphing or persistently learn and practice social skills in their everyday lives. These constant efforts often led to feelings of increased anxiety and emotional fatigue, further contributing to mental health problems.

Most extreme were Luna's experiences, who argued that the dissonance meant they could not relate to non-autistics:

I don't understand non-autistics very well, most non-autistics, ADHD people I understand well because they are autistic cousins. A friendship wouldn't be able to work well with them, it would jeopardise my mental health. I wouldn't relate to them as friends, I could talk to them but only surface level, nothing in common. What would be the point? (Luna- she/her- Interview)

Most of the participants were clear that barriers existed. Rachel explained this using an analogy about alcohol:

...you're less likely to say the wrong thing because even if you say the wrong thing everyone will put it down to being autistic and nobody will be overly offended...I've heard an analogy for autism like being the only sober person in the room, and other people are just on a slightly different wavelength, and so obviously it's easier to communicate with people who are on the same wave wavelength as you. (Rachel- she/her- Interview)

As a result, the participants suggested friendship with other autistic people was often easier. This is supported by Crompton et al (2020) who noted that spending time with other autistic people was beneficial for mental health.

This perhaps paints a picture of neurotypical and autistic people as not being able to maintain friendships due to different enactments of friendship. Whilst it is clear that this was challenging; with an understanding of this difference and an understanding of autistic friendships, the participants highlighted how being autistic helped their relationships. Steven explained how his directness was aligned with honesty and openness:

I think that being autistic has actually led to my friendships being stronger generally speaking, especially now because I'm trying to be more clear on my boundaries, and express who I am as a person more, not just trying please everyone. I found that I've been able to make stronger friendships because I'm just showing people who I am, and then if they accept that and they like that then we'll be friends, and if they don't then I will just move on, and they will remain an acquaintance. So being more truthful and open I guess, having deeper friendships. (Steven- he/him- Interview)

The stories of the participants highlighted key terms such as truth, honesty and openness, which were often seen as being beneficial in relationships (Robledo and Donnellan, 2016). These attributes could often lead the participants to take things at face value and not question the motives of other people. This had the potential to be exploited (see Sedgewick, Hill and Pellicano, 2018), but in general it was seen as a positive attribute:

The way I am in relationships is 100% impacted by my neurodivergence, in both positive and negative ways. In social relationships, I need to be able to trust the other persons word (and not their layered or nonverbal language). People find me open, honest, and direct, and they like it. (Glade- they/them- Interview)

Flexible friendships

Friendships were framed as being flexible. This is supported by the work of Allan (2008) who explored how definitions of friendships are fluid and dependent upon the parties involved:

How friends define their relationship, what they do with each other, and what expectations they have are matters that are for them to determine. In most regards, these matters are not seen as legitimate concerns of those outside the relationship.
(Allan 2008:4)

Most definitions of friendship contain reference to flexibility (Durrani and Saleem, 2022) and friendship networks are often presented as being flexible (Pescosolido and Rubin, 2000). The flexibility of friendships was the aspect most coveted by the participants, who relished being involved in relationships with few prescriptions about what the relationship should be.

Friendships were seen as having few prescriptions or assertions about how they should be lived. As a result, they were seen as the most important relationships in the participants lives. Parker explained this very clearly, creating an image of a friendship manual which they did not receive:

The main thing is I don't know how to make friends the same way everyone else does. With my mates like we've known each other quite a few years and we're very close now but it was still like I remember at school, I used to think that everyone else had got a manual about it but I missed out. Because within their first like few weeks everyone had friends and I still didn't and I didn't understand what I was doing wrong. I don't know what you're meant to say to people to come across as like a cool person. (Parker- they/them- Interview)

Although, this first appears as a negative statement, the idea of the friendship manual was explored across the interviews and diaries. The image became a positive and empowering of

explaining friendships, as friendships without manuals were seen as being more fluid and open to adaption by those involved. Indeed, friendships were open to negotiation and easily re-constructed to whatever the needs of the participants were. For some participants this was often reflected in the ease of entering/exiting friendships:

So in that way the friendship manual is a lot more flexible because if a friend does something I don't agree with or I don't like, or they start doing behaviours that I don't think are OK, I cut them off. I do not do it, I don't deal with it. Because of my experience in high School that I mentioned before, with the abuse, I don't, I just don't.
(Ben- they/them- Interview)

For other participants, the flexibility of friendships reduced expectations upon them to perform certain tasks. This will be explored in more detail in the next section in relation to intimate relationships, as the participants argued that such relationships involved careful navigation of social expectations.

This section has shown that for the participants friendship is often about companionship and being around people with similar interests. This is often enacted by doing things together. This can take place in person, but online communities and interaction is as valid and should not be undermined. Misunderstanding about autistic friendship has been perpetuated by misunderstanding of how empathy works in autistic lives. Empathy tends to work differently in autistic lives but the statement that autistic people have no empathy does not appear to be valid. Empathy is dependent upon having shared world viewpoints which is often challenging but can be navigated (Milton, 2017).

Negotiating intimate relationships

This section will explore how the participants negotiated their intimate relationships. Specifically, it will do two main things.

1- Explore how participants understood their intimate relationships, and then focus upon the challenges and how these are negotiated.

2- Explore why intimate relationships were seen as more challenging compared to friendships, and how the participants worked to negotiate this.

Understanding and negotiating intimate relationships

A friend of my nan upset me today. I went round to see her for the first time in a long time. But [NAME] was there. She talks to me weirdly and don't like her. I know I should not say that. I think my nan has told her not to talk about [NAME- Boyfriend] because she finds it awkward that I could be gay (Kane- he/him- Diary)

I had another discussion with [NAME- sister] this evening, we talked about sexuality (of course). It's all we seem to talk about. We are both mad at mum because she says I'm bi because I'm autistic. She says that it's a fact and she read it online. (Albert- he/him- Diary)

These two diary quotations highlight how all discussion about LGBT+ intimacy was prefaced by discourse surrounding validity and/or the connection between autism and sexuality/gender identity. Specifically, the participants experiences highlighted other people's perceptions of them as non-sexual (Santinele-Martino, 2017; Toft, et al 2020) or even infantile (Stevenson et al 2011). Furthermore, participants stories highlight continuing misconceptions of the influence of autism on sexuality/gender identity. As previously noted, majority of research in this area has focussed upon what is missing from an autistic persons make-up that means they are more likely to be LGBT+ (DeWinter et al, 2015;2017), or that there is a link between autism and LGBT+ identities, most clearly seen in research on asexuality (see Attanasio et al, 2022). Emerging research has tended however, to explore the connection between the two not from a position of deficiency, but as an attempt to understand how autism affects LGBT+

identities (see Hillier et al, 2021) and how this exposes the inflexibility of sexuality/gender identity (Toft, 2023).

The participants were clear that they faced challenges in their intimate lives, often in relation to sensory aspects. Touch, for example, was highlighted as being difficult for a number of participants. Glade noted how they were adverse to light-touch which they had experienced during foreplay:

I have sensory sensitivities that impact my sex life, such as I don't like light touch but others typically use that as a foreplay tactic to let you know they're in that mood. I do verbal, explicit, and specific consent, rather than making any (nonverbal, enthusiastic) assumptions, and some people think it kills the mood. But i think assuming you can do something and they didnt want it is faaaar more of a mood killer. (Glade)

Touch has been noted as being difficult for some young autistic people (Kern et al, 2007; Siegel, 1998). However, the reaction to this has been to encourage autistic people to behave more like neurotypical people, rather than to offer support or learn more about difference. Touch-therapy has been used to 'teach' autistic people to respond differently to touch (see Field et al, 1997). Glade did not frame this aspect of intimacy negatively and highlighted it as a point of negotiation not a point of change. They negotiated this using direct communication (Glade's term) where they told their partner what they desired and what they did not. Although Glade recognised that some people would not appreciate this, it was argued that would halt any negativity before it occurred.

This direct communication was seen as a positive and was often combined with attributes such as openness and honesty to present a picture of communication that was detailed and precise. As previously noted, both Glade and Steven saw this as a positive in their life and they had more truthful relationships because of this. However, this form of

communication has also been framed negatively in previous research, often being labelled as pedantic speech or over precise language (Tager-Flusberg, Paul and Lord, 2015).

Unfortunately, the desire to find out what is ‘wrong’ with autistic people, means that no other research on the potential benefits of this direct communication could be found.

Communication was difficult for some participants, and this had an impact on their intimate lives. A number of the participants discussed how they found controlling the tone of their voice a struggle. Steven explored this in relation to communicating with partners:

I find it hard to control my facial expression and my body language and my voice and then I can come across as like angry or rude, and so if someone's trying to like have just apparently ordinary pleasant conversation with me but I'm stressed and overwhelmed by everything that's going on, I can end up like snapping at them because my tone just gets really snappy and angry sounding because I'm stressed. But I'm not angry at them I'm just stressed and there is too much going on for me to control how my voice coming out. (Steven)

These aspects have sometimes been classified as ‘intonational peculiarities’ (Tager-Flusberg, Paul and Lord, 2015) (not my term or position) and have been seen as a key indicator of autism (Fay and Shuler, 1980; Shriberg et al, 2001). However, the stories of the participants suggest this aspect of speech is accentuated by being overwhelmed. In order to negotiate this aspect, participants discussed having time to decompress. Having space away from busy situations offered an opportunity to relieve stress and prevent burnout. A number of participants talked about how they could recognise when this was approaching and organised their days accordingly. Ben, during their interview, noted how during lockdown they had set out time to decompress away from the intensity of being in an intimate relationship in such close proximity. They had also put time aside after our interview to decompress. The interview process was anticipated as being intense and potentially stress-inducing and so they

had put time aside to recharge. Higgins et al (2021), work on burnout is perhaps the most developed and relevant here. The authors distinguish meltdown (overpowering emotions) from burnout (emotional numbness). They suggest that this is different to depression as it results from ‘social interaction demands/masking fatigue and overload’ and having time away from stimulus is important (Higgins et al, 2021:2365). Disconnecting from such stimulus was a key negotiation technique and shows how the participants managed this aspect of everyday life and indeed, their relationships.

Comparing intimate relationships with friendships

Overall, the participants found intimate relationships more difficult than friendships because there were certain expectations placed upon intimate relationships. They felt that there were things in intimate relationships that needed to be done in order to validate that relationship. Parker gave the example of holding hands and how they felt pressured to do this at certain times:

...there's so many things, especially with like contact in relationships. It's just like you should be doing this but now, you should be holding hands...and I don't really like that very much and it's just a stressful business and I've stayed away from it for the time being. (Parker)

Relationship quality is often judged by acts of physical affection (Gulledge et al, 2003). Indeed, links have been made between physical affection and being closer ‘spiritually’ and ‘psychological’ (Mackey et al, 2000). Physical affection becomes a routine behaviour that indicates solidarity in relationships (Dainton and Stafford, 1993). It has been accepted into public consciousness that such affection needs to take place and that people are happier when it does (Gulledge et al, 2007). It is perhaps unsurprising that such expectation weighs heavy

on the participants. As a result, unlike friendships, which were presented as being flexible and mutually agreed upon between those involved, intimate relationships had patterns of behaviour that had to be replicated in order for that relationship to be seen as successful.

This aspect of intimate relationships was best explored by Dennis in his diary:

I enjoyed some time with [NAME]. I don't like to compare people and it is not a fair thing to do. But when I was with my ex-partner she was always telling me off for not doing certain things. I remember she said that after seeing each other for 3 months we should be spending pretty much every day together. Then at 6 months our families should have met.

This was negotiated by planning and organisation. Ben noted how they had check-in meetings in which they could talk about what they needed:

We had monthly check-ins and things like that. I was like right, OK. I used to schedule it, right out, I just want to make sure things are going how they should be going. It was the first Wednesday of the month, was the monthly check-in. I would just go through, this is what I am happy with, what are you happy with? What are you not happy with, and this is what I am not happy with. And this is how we can work it out. I think that has been a fantastic thing. (Ben)

This approach was considered and planned and demonstrated a way of focussing upon what those in the relationship desired, rather than what was expected.

This section has shown that intimate relationships are challenging and that challenges are sometimes accentuated for young autistic LGBT+ persons. Intimate relationships are less flexible than friendships and require planning to maintain and work against neuro-typical expectations of intimacy. However, issues such as touch, communication and burnout are parts of relationships that require negotiation. Previous research has framed these challenges as insurmountable and have suggesting that the only response is to train people to be mimic

neurotypical behaviour. However, the participants highlighted methods of negotiating these challenges that reject the idea that such attributes mean relationship failure is inevitable.

Conclusions

This article has done two main things. Firstly, it has shown that autistic friendships can be different to neurotypical friendships but they are no less valid. The emphasis tends to be upon companionship, spending time and 'doing things' together, as opposed to being focus upon emotional exchange. However, for the participants, this companionship provided the emotional support that both required. Aligned with this is the rejection of the idea that autistic people cannot form friendships due to a lack of empathy. The participants of this research demonstrated what the Double Empathy Problem suggests. Friendships with those who share a completely different worldview (due to being autistic) is challenging and empathy in these scenarios is difficult. Indeed, a number of the participants found relationships with neurotypicals impossible, whilst others explained the complex navigations they enacted in order to maintain such relationships.

Second, the article has plotted the challenges that the participants faced in their intimate relationships and highlighted the ways that these are negotiated within everyday life. Intimate relationships were framed as being more difficult to maintain due to the expectations placed upon them. Friendships were seen as malleable and adaptable, whereas intimate relationships had certain enactments that needed to be observed in order to validate the relationship. Put simply, those involved in intimate relationships are expected to perform certain tasks (e.g., holding hands) in order to visualise the relationship and for it to be seen as real. The article suggests that models of friendship tend to exclude neurodivergent persons. Research that has attempted to explain why autistic people cannot form friendships has not

focussed upon the most important issue at hand which is producing a more inclusive understanding of friendship and intimacy.

References

- Allan, G. (2008). Flexibility, friendship, and family. *Personal Relationships*, 15(1), 1-16.
- Attanasio M, Masedu F, Quattrini F, Pino MC, Vagnetti R, Valenti M and Mazza M (2021) Are Autism Spectrum Disorder and Asexuality Connected? *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 51(4), 2091-2115.
- Attwood, T. (1998). *Asperger's syndrome: A guide for parents and professionals*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, Ltd.
- Baron-Cohen, S. (1991). Do people with autism understand what causes emotion? *Child Development*, 62(2), 385-395.
- Bauminger, N. & Shulman, C. (2003). The development and maintenance of friendship in high-functioning children with autism: Maternal perceptions. *Autism*, 7(1), 81-97.
- Bertilsdotter Rosqvist H., Chown N., and Stenning A. (eds). (2020). *Neurodiversity studies: A new critical paradigm*. Routledge.
- Black, M.H., Kuzminski, R., Wang, J., Ang, J., Lee, C., Hafidzuddin, S. & McGarry, S., (2022). Experiences of Friendships for Individuals on the Autism Spectrum: A Scoping Review. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 1-26.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-022-00332-8>
- Braun, V., & Clarke V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Brownlow, C. (1997). "The Construction of the Autistic Individual: Investigations in Online Discussion Groups." PhD dissertation., University of Brighton.
- Brownlow, C., Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, H. & O'Dell, L., 2015. Exploring the potential for social networking among people with autism: Challenging dominant ideas of 'friendship'. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 17(2), pp.188-193.

- Carrington, S., Templeton, E. & Papinczak, T. (2003). Adolescents with Asperger syndrome and perceptions of friendship. *Focus On Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 18(4), 211-218.
- Cesaroni, L., & Garber, M. (1991). Exploring the experience of autism through firsthand accounts. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 21(3), pp.303-313.
- Crompton, C. J., Hallett, S., Ropar, D., Flynn, E., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2020). 'I never realised everybody felt as happy as I do when I am around autistic people': A thematic analysis of autistic adults' relationships with autistic and neurotypical friends and family. *Autism*, 24(6), 1438–1448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320908976>
- Dainton, M., & Stafford, L. (1993). Routine maintenance behaviors: A comparison of relationship type, partner similarity and sex differences. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 10(2), 255-271.
- Demir, M., Jaafar, J., Bilyk, N. & Mohd Ariff, M.R. (2012). Social skills, friendship and happiness: A cross-cultural investigation. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 152(3), 379-385.
- Dewinter, J., Vermeiren, R., Vanwesenbeeck, I., Lobbestael, J., and Nieuwenhuizen, C. (2015). Sexuality in adolescent boys with autism spectrum disorder: Self-reported behaviours and attitudes. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45(3), 731–741.
doi:10.1007/s10803-014-2226-3
- Dewinter, J., De Graaf, H., & Begeer, S. (2017). Sexual orientation, gender identity, and romantic relationships in adolescents and adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47(9), 2927–2934. doi:10.1007/s10803-017-3199-9
- Durrani, A.K., & Saleem, M. (2022). Friendship Functions in Emerging Adults in Post COVID-19 Era-A Preliminary Exploration. *Journal of Professional & Applied Psychology*, 3(2), 293-305.

- Fay, W., & Schuler, A. L. (1980). *Emerging language in autistic children*. Baltimore: University Park Press.
- Field, T., Lasko, D., Mundy, P., Henteleff, T., Kabat, S., Talpins, S., & Dowling, M. (1997). Brief report: autistic children's attentiveness and responsivity improve after touch therapy. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 27(3), 333-38.
- Foggo, R.S.V., & Webster, A.A. (2017). Understanding the social experiences of adolescent females on the autism spectrum. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 35, 74-85.
- George, R., & Stokes, M.A. (2018). Sexual orientation in autism spectrum disorder. *Autism Research*, 11(1), 133-141.
- Goldsmith E (2007) Stress, fatigue, and social support in the work and family context. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 12(2), 155–69.
- Gulledge, A. K., Gulledge, M. H., & Stahmann, R. F. (2003). Romantic physical affection types and relationship satisfaction. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 31, 233-242.
- Gulledge, A. K., Hill, M., Lister, Z., & Sallion, C. (2007). Non-erotic physical affection: It's good for you. In L. L'Abate (Ed.), *Low-cost approaches to promote physical and mental health: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 371-383). Springer Science + Business Media, LLC.
- Hancock, G. I., Stokes, M. A., & Mesibov, G. B. (2019). Romantic experiences for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder. *Sexuality and Disability*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-019-09573-8>.
- Happe, F. (1994). *Autism: An introduction to psychological theory*. Harvard University Press.
- Hays, R.B. (1988). Friendship. In S.W Duck (ed.), *Handbook of Personal Relationships: Theory, Research, and Interventions*. (pp. 391-408) John Wiley & Sons.

- Hillier, A., Gallop, N., Mendes, E., Tellez, D., Buckingham, A., Nizami, A., & O'Toole, D. (2020). LGBTQ+ and autism spectrum disorder: Experiences and challenges. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 21(1), 98-110.
- Hobson, P. (2005). Autism and emotion. In F. R. Volkmar, R. Paul, A. Klin, & D. Cohen (Eds.), *Handbook of autism and pervasive developmental disorders: Diagnosis, development, neurobiology, and behavior* (pp. 406–422). Wiley.
- Hodges, E.V., Boivin, M., Vitaro, F. & Bukowski, W.M. (1999). The power of friendship: protection against an escalating cycle of peer victimization. *Developmental Psychology*, 35(1), 94-101.
- Hogan, M.S., & Micucci, J.A. (2020). Same-sex relationships of men with autism spectrum disorder in middle adulthood: An interpretative phenomenological study. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 7(2), 176-185.
- Jacelon, C.S. & Imperio, K. (2005). Participant diaries as a source of data in research with older adults. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(7), 991-997.
- Jackson, L. (2003) *Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome: A User's Guide to Adolescence*. Jessica Kingsley.
- Jamieson, L. (2008). Friendship and befriending. Befriending Network Scotland Conference, Edinburgh, UK. Edinburgh: Centre for Research on Families And Relationships, University of Edinburgh.
- Jamieson, L. (2011). Intimacy as a concept: Explaining social change in the context of globalisation or another form of ethnocentrism? *Sociological Research Online*, 16(4), 151-163.
- Kasari, C., Locke, J., Gulsrud, A., & Rotheram-Fuller, E. (2011). Social networks and friendships at school: Comparing children with and without ASD. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 41(5), 533-544.

- Kenton, C. (2010). Narrating oneself: Reflections on the use of solicited diaries with diary interviews. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 11(2), 16.
- Kern, J.K., Trivedi, M.H., Grannemann, B.D., Garver, C.R., Johnson, D.G., Andrews, A.A., & Schroeder, J.L. (2007). Sensory correlations in autism. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 11, 123–134.
- Kuo, M.H., Orsmond, G.I., Cohn, E.S. & Coster, W.J. (2013). Friendship characteristics and activity patterns of adolescents with an autism spectrum disorder. *Autism*, 17(4), 481-500.
- La Greca, A.M. & Harrison, H.M. (2005). Adolescent peer relations, friendships, and romantic relationships: Do they predict social anxiety and depression? *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 34(1), 49-61.
- Lawson, W. (2001). *Life Behind Glass: A Personal Account of Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Jessica Kingsley
- Lawson, W. (2006). *Friendships The Aspie Way*. Jessica Kingsley.
- Lewis, L.F. (2022). Autism as a difference or a disorder? Exploring the views of individuals who use peer-led online support groups for autistic partners. *Autism*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221097850>.
- Lord, C., M. Rutter, & A. Le Couteur. (1994). Autism Diagnostic Interview-Revised: A Revised Version of A Diagnostic Interview for Caregivers of Individuals with Possible Pervasive Developmental Disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 24 (5), 659–685. doi:10.1007/BF02172145.
- Mackey, R. A., Diemer, M. A., & O'Brien, B. A. (2000). Psychological intimacy in the lasting relationships of heterosexual and same-gender couples. *Sex Roles*, 43, 201-227.
- Milton, D. (2012). On the Ontological Status of Autism: the ‘Double Empathy Problem’. *Disability and Society*. 27(6), 883-887.
- Milton, D. (2017). *A mismatch of salience*. Pavilion

- Orsmond, G. I., M. W. Krauss, & M. M. Seltzer. (2004). Peer Relationships and Social and Recreational Activities among Adolescents and Adults with Autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 34(3), 245–256. doi:10.1023/B:JADD.0000029547.96610.df.
- Petrina, N., Carter, M. & Stephenson, J. (2014). The nature of friendship in children with autism spectrum disorders: A systematic review. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 8(2), 111-126.
- Pescosolido, B. A., & Rubin, B. A. (2000). The web of group affiliations revisited: Social life, postmodernism, and sociology. *American Sociological Review*, 65, 52–76.
- Robledo, J., & Donnellan, A.M. (2016). Supportive relationships in autism spectrum disorder: Perspectives of individuals with ASD and supporters. *Behavioral Sciences*, 6(4), 23. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs6040023>.
- Rossetti, Z. (2011). Helping or hindering: The role of secondary educators in facilitating friendship opportunities among students with and without autism or developmental disability. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16(12), 1259–1272.
- Ryan, C., Coughlan, M., Maher, J., Vicario, P., & Garvey, A. (2021). Perceptions of friendship among girls with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 36(3), 393-407.
- Sala, G., Hooley, M., & Stokes, M.A. (2020). Romantic intimacy in autism: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 50(11), 4133-4147.
- Saldarriaga, L.M., Bukowski, W.M., & Greco, C. (2015). Friendship and happiness: A bidirectional dynamic process. In M. Demir (Ed.), *Friendship and happiness* (pp. 59–78). Springer.
- Santinele Martino, A. (2017). Crippling sexualities: An analytic review of theoretical and empirical writing on the intersection of disabilities and sexualities. *Sociology Compass*, 11(5): e12471.

- Sedgewick, F., Hill, V. and Pellicano, E. (2018). Parent perspectives on autistic girls' friendships and futures. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, 3, p.2396941518794497.
- Shriberg, L., Paul, R., McSweeney, J., Klin, A., Cohen, D., & Volkmar, F. (2001). Speech and prosody characteristics of adolescents and adults with high-functioning autism and Asperger syndrome. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 44, 1097–1115.
- Siegel, B. (1998). *The world of the autistic child: Understanding and treating autistic spectrum disorders*. Oxford University Press.
- Stevenson, J.L., Harp, B. & Gernsbacher, M.A. (2011). Infantilizing Autism. *Disability Studies Quarterly: DSQ*, 31(3).
- Tager-Flusberg, H., Paul, R., & Lord, C.E. (2005). Language and communication in autism. In F. Volkmar, R. Paul, A. Klin, & D.J. Cohen (Eds.), *Handbook of Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorder*, (3rd ed., pp. 335–364). Wiley.
- Toft, A., 2023. Telling disabled and autistic sexuality stories: Reflecting upon the current research landscape and possible future developments. *Sexes*, 4(1), pp.102-117.
- Toft, A., Ward, B. and Anonymous author, 2022. A young disabled LGBT+ researchers group: working collaboratively to explore the lives of young autistic LGBT+ persons. *Sociological Research Online*, p.13607804221125233.
- Toft, A., Franklin, A. and Langley, E., 2020. 'You're not sure that you are gay yet': The perpetuation of the 'phase' in the lives of young disabled LGBT+ people. *Sexualities*, 23(4), pp.516-529.
- Whitehouse, A.J., Durkin, K., Jaquet, E., & Ziatas, K. (2009). Friendship, Loneliness and Depression in Adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome. *Journal of Adolescence*, 32(2), 309–322. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2008.03.004.

Wood, M.A., Bukowski, W.M. & Santo, J.B. (2017). Friendship security, but not friendship intimacy, moderates the stability of anxiety during preadolescence. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 46(6), 798-809.

Worth, N. (2009). Making use of audio diaries in research with young people: Examining narrative, participation and audience. *Sociological Research Online*, 14(4), 77-87.

Yew, R.Y., Samuel, P., Hooley, M., Mesibov, G.B. and Stokes, M.A. (2021). A systematic review of romantic relationship initiation and maintenance factors in autism. *Personal Relationships*, 8(4), 777-802.

Funding Statement

The collaborative research Group with whom the author works was set-up using funding from Nottingham Trent University.

Competing Interests

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.