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"My Autism Is My Own": Autistic Identity and Intersectionality in the School Context

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Abstract

Background: School is an important context for identity development across childhood and adolescence. These formative experiences impact adulthood. Minimal research has examined first-person autistic perspectives of how school experiences shape autistic identity as well as other intersecting identities. In this study, we examined the school messages that autistic individuals received and how individuals engaged with these external messages to formulate their identities.

Methods: Ten U.S.-based autistic adolescents and adults ages 15–35 participated in qualitative interviews about their elementary through secondary school experiences, interactions with teachers and peers, and how these shaped their identities. Two interviewees also engaged in three follow-up interviews each for member checking and further data gathering. Using a critical constructivist approach informed by grounded theory, we coded interviews inductively. We ensured the trustworthiness of data through peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, memoing, and member checking.

Results: In the school context, autistic students received stigmatizing messages from teachers and peers regarding their autism. These messages varied in relation to students' other identities, including race and gender. Participants felt that, following autism disclosure, teachers viewed them narrowly through an autism lens. Participants actively resisted these negative messages from teachers and peers by reclaiming their autistic identity. They reframed and redefined their autistic identity, embraced their autism-related strengths, and actively made choices about how, when, and to whom to disclose their autism. Decisions around autism disclosure intersected with decisions to emphasize other identities such as race or mental health, especially when these identities were more visible or more acceptable to others.

Conclusions: The school context conveyed powerful, stigmatizing messages around autism. In response, autistic students actively reclaimed and shaped their identities to prioritize a positive, empowered sense of self. Findings show a need for educators to model positive perceptions of autism, build an inclusive school community, and advocate for autistic representation in schools to facilitate autism-affirming messages.

Keywords: autism, autistic identity, intersectionality, school, stigma, qualitative analysis, grounded theory

Community Brief

What was the purpose of this study?

This study examined how autistic adolescents' and adults' school experiences affected their identities including autism, race, gender, and sexuality. We explored how teachers' and peers' messages impacted autistic students' views of themselves and how participants' experiences with autism differed by race, gender, mental health, and other identities.

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What did the researchers do?

We interviewed 10 autistic adolescents and adults ages 15–35 in the United States and conducted 3 follow-up interviews with 2 participants. Participants had diverse identities across gender, race, and sexuality. Participants answered questions about their autistic identity, their school experiences, and interactions with teachers and peers. We read and analyzed interviews to look for common themes.

What were the results of the study?

Participants reported receiving negative messages about autism from teachers and peers in school. Participants felt that teachers often treated them differently than other students, seeing only their autism and not seeing other aspects of their identity. Autistic students' gender and race seemed to also affect how their teachers and peers treated them. For example, autistic women and people of color often described negative experiences related to their teachers' biases about gender or race. At the same time, autistic participants resisted these negative ideas. They held positive views and saw autism as bringing strengths, such as helping them learn. Participants believed that autistic identity looks different for each person and they were careful in deciding when to tell someone that they were autistic. They emphasized their autistic identity less than other identities that were more visible (e.g., race) or more acceptable to others (e.g., mental health problems).

What do these findings add to what was already known?

Participants were vocal in rejecting negative messages from teachers and peers. They formed their own positive opinions about autism. Most past research does not look at autistic people's other identities, such as race and gender, but we did: we found that autistic students with other stigmatized identities, such as girls and people of color, reported especially negative treatment in school.

What are potential weaknesses in the study?

With a small sample, we could not find patterns by gender or race. We did not always ask every participant about how their other identities, such as sexuality, race, or gender, were related to their autistic identity. If we had done so, we may have heard more details from some participants. We also did not have any participants with high communication support needs, and so, we could not include their experiences. As the researchers are all nonautistic, we may have interpreted people's responses differently from autistic people's experiences.

How will these findings help autistic adults now or in the future?

Teacher and peer messages can negatively affect how autistic youth view themselves and their autistic identity. Teachers should be trained to affirm and support autistic students. Findings also showed that autistic students and their peers learn negative ideas about autism early. To address these biases, we need to educate all students about autism.

Introduction

School is central in shaping how autistic youth and emerging adults develop their autism identity.[1] Messages from teachers and peers and identity resources such as curricula, pedagogical practices, and policies impact a youth's autistic identity and its intersections with other emerging identities.[2,3] While autistic students are increasingly integrated in general education and inclusive schools,[4] they often experience social rejection, victimization, bullying by peers, and disproportionate exclusionary discipline by teachers,[5–7] suggesting that school may be a risky context for autistic students' identity development.[8]

Models of identity development and intersectionality

Autistic identity development can be understood through the larger context of disability identity—a positive sense of self and connection with others who are part of the disability community.[9] Autistic individuals also hold other social identities (e.g., gender, race, mental health) that shape their life experiences. Although autistic adults make up ~2% of the adult population,[10] identified prevalence is disparate across gender and race. Males are four times more likely than females to be diagnosed, and among children, non-Hispanic White children are 7% more likely than Black children and 22% more likely than Hispanic children to be diagnosed with autism.[11] Economic and social contexts shape how children are diagnosed and treated.[12] These race and gender identities are not experienced in isolation from one another but rather intersect through social processes to form one's identity. The intersection of identities and individuals' experience of discrimination and privilege in relation to these identities is known as intersectionality.[13]

For autistic individuals, race, gender, and other identities, and how they exist within oppressive systems, may shape (and be shaped by) an individual's autistic identity. Few studies have examined how autistic individuals develop their identities from an intersectional perspective[14,15] and few models of identity development account for intersectionality. The Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI)[16] offers a way to understand identity development intersectionally. RMMDI has primarily been

examined among multiply marginalized, queer students of color attending predominantly White universities. This model considers how individuals negotiate multiple identities as their identity saliency shifts depending on their social context and how they interpret their contexts.[16]

RMMDI also describes how individuals separate their multiple intersecting identities from oppressive messages imposed by systemic structures.[17] Among autistic youth and emerging adults, this process may involve making meaning of how their autistic identity relates to other salient identities such as race or sexuality in a society that privileges White neurotypical development.[18]

School as an important context for autistic identity development

As a primary environment for youth identity development,[7,19] schools are places for students to engage in social comparisons, evaluation by others, and peer acceptance, attributes that are strongly linked to self-definition and self-appraisal[20,21] and, in turn, mental health and well-being.[3] Autistic students are often excluded from peers at school, with frequent rejection, bullying, and loneliness,[3,22,23] strained relationships with teachers,[24] and disproportionate experiences with exclusionary discipline.[25–27] As such, schools appear to be risky contexts for autistic identity development.

Autistic adolescents and adults have described school as contributing to both negative and positive perceptions of autism. Among 41 autistic adolescents, researchers found that while the positive benefits of their autism were noted by nearly half, the majority attributed negative qualities or experiences to their autistic identity; participants reported more negative perceptions of their autism as opposed to positive benefits of the diagnostic label.[28] Others described autism as a value-neutral part of their identity, viewing autism as a difference in line with handedness or height.[29] In another qualitative study with 20 autistic adults, school was a place where initial decisions had been made about autism disclosure, with some concealing their diagnosis to manage the stigma associated with the label.[29,30]

The impact of peers and teachers on autistic identity development

The impact of the school context increases across age as peer relationships become more central to identity throughout adolescence.[31,32] Autistic adults described repeated exposure to negative peer interactions, most often in school, as leading them to develop a negative self-appraisal or feel different from others.[22,33] In their meta-analysis, Williams et al.[7] found that 9–21-year-old students' autistic identity development—including the degree to which they held a positive affirming view or a negative conflicted view—was shaped by relationships with nonautistic peers and educators, by academic difficulties they associated with autism, and by the ways their sensory reactions impacted physical comfort in school.[7]

Positive student–teacher/staff relationships enhance autistic students' positive identity, while negative interactions can exacerbate youths' sense of being different from others.[7] Furthermore, some autistic individuals attribute their negative autistic identity to disconnection from a disability community, few disability-affirming interactions with teachers, and the absence of autistic representation in school.[2]

Intersectionality in the school context

Preexisting power structures in school perpetuate a deficit-based understanding of disability.[2] An intersectional view of autistic youths' and adults' identity development must account for the existing inequities around race and gender in our school systems.[34] These inequities may be exacerbated when combined with deficit-oriented views of students with disabilities.[2] As individuals draw from their environment to make sense of their identities, this may leave autistic youth of color without identity-affirming models.[35,36]

The intersection of autism and gender is complex: gender-based assumptions about behavior and socialization may contribute to delayed diagnosis for autistic girls. Autistic girls and women also do not see themselves reflected in images of autism.[37] For autistic girls, school may elevate social messages of what autism looks like (read: not female) and how girls should act, in ways that are incompatible with the prevailing perceptions of autism[15] or cast doubt on the veracity of the diagnosis.[15,38] Later diagnoses among girls and women may hinder their ability to build an autistic community and form an autistic identity.[39] These barriers may be especially pronounced for autistic girls and women of color[40] given the White male prototype associated with autism.

The current study

Schools are an important context for autistic identity development, a process that may be informed by students' intersecting identities, including race and gender. We examine how autistic adolescents and adults reflect on their identity development in school, guided by two questions:

1. What messages do autistic individuals receive in the school context about their autism and their intersecting social identities?
2. How do individuals engage with these external school-based messages as they develop their identities?

Methods

Procedures

We interviewed 10 autistic adolescents and adults for this qualitative study of autistic students' school experiences. We used a critical-constructivist approach, informed by grounded theory, highlighting individuals' experiences in light of their social context and their multiple social identities,[41] including disability.[18,42] An interview protocol, or a set of interview questions, was generated by the research team that included clinical and education researchers with qualitative interviewing experience. Lead researchers developed an interview protocol draft that included accessible language and concrete topics that allowed for follow-up questions, to gain rich detailed information about participants' school experiences. Consistent with grounded theory, interview questions evolved during the process as salient topics emerged. Interviews were part of a larger study examining participants' school experiences and their identity development and informed the development of an autism-focused teacher training program; the latter is not described in this study. Study activities were approved by the university Institutional Review Board.

Recruitment and eligibility. Participants were recruited through local autism advocacy groups, autism support organizations, social media groups for autistic adults, and word of mouth. We sought representation of autistic people of color and women or nonbinary individuals, whose perspectives are underrepresented in autism research. We also enrolled a balance between individuals still in K-12 schooling ($n=4$ adolescents) and those who were not ($n=6$ adults).

Interested individuals (or, for those younger than 18 years, their caregivers) were screened for eligibility through phone or email and were provided with the consent form (and assent form, for those younger than 18 years). People who met the eligibility criteria (ages 15 and older; based in the United States; attended K-12 schooling in the United States; self-identified as being autistic or having autism or a historically equivalent diagnosis such as Asperger's) were scheduled for interviews.

Interviews. Interviews were conducted in person at the research office ($n=2$), at the participant's home or preferred location ($n=3$), or through videoconferencing ($n=5$) in line with participant preferences. Interviews occurred between November 2019 and August 2020, lasting 79 minutes on average (range: 65–100). Two adolescents chose to have a caregiver present; comments from caregivers were not coded.

Before interviews, the eligibility criteria were confirmed, consent and assent forms were reviewed aloud with questions addressed, consent and/or assent were obtained for interviews and audio recordings, and demographics were gathered verbally. Source of diagnosis was assessed as follows: ''From whom did you receive the autism-related diagnosis? (e.g., primary care doctor, psychologist, psychiatrist, self).'' To determine how participants self-identified in relation to autism (shown in Table 1), we also asked, ''How do you describe your autistic identity? For instance, autism, Asperger's, PDD-NOS, autism spectrum, other.''

Researchers interviewed participants about their K-12 school experiences, interactions and relationships with teachers and peers, and the role their autistic identity played in school; data were separated into multiple papers. Trustworthiness of data was ensured through peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, memoing, and member checking. Researchers met regularly during data collection to discuss emerging topics, explanations for concepts that came from the interviews, and connections between the data and relevant literature. Team members engaged in reflexive journaling during data collection to identify evolving interpretations and critically evaluate how our positionalities might shape interpretations.[43] We used theoretical sampling: interviews were examined in relation to one another and to theory through constant comparison, informing changes to the interview protocol.[41,44]

Two of the 10 interviewees were invited to participate in three additional interviews each. We selected these participants after completing the majority of our interviews, with the goal of gathering more in-depth insights into emerging themes and informing our teacher training program (not reported in this study). These two individuals were selected because their initial interviews revealed rich experiences relevant to the intersections between autism and other identities, schooling, mental health, and teacher and peer interactions. The additional interviews allowed for member checking, as the two interviewees provided feedback and clarification on emerging topics. Given that in-depth interviewees completed 140–180 minutes of additional interview time, each of their excerpts is more prevalent in our findings. Across all 16 interviews, we gathered 18.67 hours of data. Interviewees received an honorarium of 75USD; the two in-depth interviewees received 300USD.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	*Age*	*Gender*	*Race; ethnicity*	*Sexual orientation*	*Autism identity*	*School/employment status*
Chris	25	Male	White	Straight	Autism	Employed full-time
David	15	Male	White	Straight	Asperger's	High school student
Madison	17	Female	White	Straight	Autism	High school student
Cameron	16	Gender nonconforming	White	Bisexual	Autism spectrum	High school student
Natalia[a]	20	Cis female	White, Black, and Latina; Dominican-Amer.	Pansexual	Autistic	Full-time college student, employed part-time
Taylor[a]	19	Female	White	Gay	Autism spectrum	Full-time college student
Hannah	22	Gender fluid	White and Native American; English and Cherokee	Pansexual polysexual	Autistic	Part-time college student
Esme	18	Cis woman	Biracial; Mexican and White	Asexual	Autism	High school student
Timothy	35	Male	White	Straight	Asperger's	Employed part-time, part-time student
Arman	19	Man	Hispanic	Straight	High functioning autism	Full-time college student

Gender, race (except that Caucasian was changed to White in two instances), ethnicity, sexual orientation, and autism identity are written in participants' own words.

[a]These two participants served as in-depth interviewees, completing three additional follow-up interviews and contributing to member checking and identification of themes.

Participants

Participants were 10 autistic adolescents and adults ages 15–35 years (mean: 20.6 years, SD = 5.8); see demographics, Table 1. All were U.S. born and most resided in Massachusetts ($n = 6$), with one each from New Hampshire and Florida and two from California. Participants' sexuality, gender, race, and school and employment status are described in Table 1.

Participants reported a range of diagnostic and special education experiences. Nine had a diagnosis of autism or a historically equivalent diagnosis such as Asperger's from a medical professional(s); one was self-diagnosed. On average, participants were diagnosed or self-diagnosed at age 8.3 (range: 2–14 years); two did not know when they were diagnosed. Nine out of 10 had an Individualized Education Plan during their K-12 schooling. Most reported having attended public schools, two attended private schools for part of their schooling.

Researcher positionality

Interviews were conducted by a clinical psychology doctoral student. Our data analysis team included one Latina woman, two White women, and one Black woman: two faculty and two doctoral students. No one from our team identified as autistic. We acknowledge that this perpetuates the pattern of nonautistic researchers' writing about autistic people, a problem in the field that has too often neglected the importance of researchers' positionality.[45] All members have experience with autistic youth and/or adults as clinicians, colleagues, and/or teachers, and conduct qualitative and quantitative research on experiences of autistic people and their families.

Data analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were then coded, which involved identifying meaningful excerpts in the text and describing the concepts reflected in these excerpts. We coded transcripts in two phases. First, we identified potential codes inductively, derived from participants' responses, and semantically, rather than drawing inferences from the data. Three coders developed a codebook with labels, definitions, and examples. The first four interviews were coded together to monitor reliability. Subsequent interviews were each coded by two researchers to identify disagreements, which were resolved through postcoding discussions. The codebook was iteratively modified to include new codes, edit definitions, and add examples. Transcripts were recoded as needed for newly added codes. Coding revealed saturation in common themes. Second, three coders used memoing—independent review of codes and corresponding excerpts—and weekly discussions to identify themes, patterns, and connections across codes.

This process involved a critical evaluation of how our positionalities shaped our data interpretation. We organized codes into a meaningful framework to address our questions. This process included merging or separating some codes; for example, concerns about disclosure to peers and teachers were separated into two codes to capture differences.

Results

Participants reported on their K-12 school experiences and how these shaped their identities as adolescents or adults, including the messages they received about their identities and the ways they asserted control over these identities. Themes are summarized in Tables 2 and 3.

What messages do autistic individuals receive in the school context about their autism and their intersecting social identities?

Teacher messages

Subtheme 1: Teachers' assumptions shape their interactions with autistic students. Participants described how teachers' assumptions about their autistic identity shaped how they viewed themselves. Disclosing their autism to teachers was viewed as having negative, often unanticipated, consequences. Specifically, teachers' attitudes toward them changed; teachers saw them unidimensionally through an autism ''filter'' rather than holistically as an individual with strengths and weaknesses. Cameron, a White, gender-nonconforming 16-year old, described how as soon as teachers learned they were autistic they change their pedagogy toward them: ''They dumb everything down. Like we are not stupid. Like we are smart, a lot of them are smarter than the rest of the world.''

Madison, a straight, White, female high school student, also described how her teacher may have been targeting her because of her diagnoses, especially attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD):

> She'd let us sit on yoga balls in that class but like if you bounced it, she took it away from you … sometimes I'd have to move around because I couldn't keep still, and it would bounce, and she'd take my desk away and like she'd make me write on a clipboard on a yoga ball. Or like she was just very, very upset to the point where I didn't even want to go back to school because she made me cry a lot. … A lot of it was from my diagnoses of, like, ADHD and stuff and she was like targeting that because I couldn't control it.

Madison believed the teacher was treating her unfairly by embarrassing her in front of her peers.

Chris, a 25-year-old White man, described feeling misunderstood and targeted by teachers; teachers viewed his behavior through a negative lens:

> Teachers you know didn't understand, like, spectrum-related stuff. Like they think, ''Oh he's misbehaving purposefully''… It seemed like it was always in the same way; they'd have in their mind that you were lying and doing something purposefully and have that filter on what they were saying and how they looked at you like, no, you're just a bad kid or something like that… no questions, just assumptions.

These messages reflected a deficit-oriented perspective that subjugated neurodiverse students. Coming from teachers in a position of power, these messages were powerful in shaping students' views of themselves.

Subtheme 2: Teacher messages vary by students' intersecting identities. Teachers' attitudes toward autism varied in relation to students' race and gender, with distinct messages applied

Table 2. Themes in Response to Research Question 1

What messages do autistic individuals receive from the school context about their autism identity and their intersecting social identities?

Theme/subtheme	*Definition*	*Example quotation*
Teacher messages		
1. Teachers' assumptions shape their interactions with autistic students	Teachers' attitudes and behavior toward their autistic students changed upon learning of their autism. Rather than taking a holistic view of the student, teachers filtered autistic students' actions and capabilities through an autism lens.	''It was just one of those days where you're like, ''Oh, I'm not going to talk about this anymore [laughter].'' … [After I disclosed my autism,] I sort of got relegated back to the sidelines.''
2. Teacher messages vary by students' intersecting identities	Teachers' messages around autism, and attitudes toward the student, varied in relation to students' other social identities, namely their race and gender. This was reflected in teachers' treatment of, and expectations for, the autistic youth.	''[Autistic girls get misunderstood] because girls are socialized to keep our problems to ourselves for the most part. And just go along with what other people want. Make other people happier so we're more likely to keep quiet about things that are bothering us, or try and wash off our own problems.''
Social messages		
1. Peers stigmatize autistic students	Peers' assumptions about autism, including what it means for autistic students' academic abilities and social motivations, impacted their interactions with autistic students.	''[When it comes to making friends,] an autistic person's a beggar who can't be a chooser, so if you do give them a chance in a relationship they, hopefully, become very devoted to you.''
2. Social experiences vary by students' intersecting identities	For autistic students with other marginalized identities (e.g., gender, mental health disability), their social experiences varied in relation to these intersecting identities. This intersectionally varied treatment included victimization and microaggressions.	''I think that the gay community is also positioned kind of on the fringes. Though society is much, much, much, much more accepting than it used to be, but there's just a different dialectic, a different way of—oftentimes different ways of participating in social groups and social dynamics. And I think that that can interact with autism in really interesting ways.''

to participants who were autistic and Black and/or Latinx. Natalia, a 20-year-old multiracial woman, described how a high school English teacher viewed her autism through a racialized lens that supported stereotypes about Black women and mental illness, identifying the student with a character from a Bronte novel, Bertha, who is portrayed as a violent, mentally ill woman of color in colonized Britain:

> As one of the few women of color, I dealt with a lot of stereotypes around angry Black women, or angry Latina women, or mentally ill Black women. I had this teacher who—I still really love her. But she told me—have you ever read Jane Eyre? … She told me that whenever she imagined Bertha, she imagined me … I was very much known as the crazy one all throughout—I mean, elementary school, I got called crazy, middle school, got called crazy. Not so much in high school, but yeah.

Natalia's teacher brazenly exposed her own biases, revealing how she saw her as a racialized character described by Bronte herself as ''savage'' and insane.[46,47] This stereotype traveled with Natalia throughout later school experiences.

Participants also described teachers' gender-based expectations in how they viewed male compared with female autistic students. Taylor, a 19-year-old White woman, explains how teachers made assumptions about her autism and her gender:

> I've had teachers before who—you'll have me and a guy who had very similar stuff and they'll seem to notice that the guy's having a problem … a lot faster than me. And again, that's not anything against the teacher in specific, it's something that we associate with guys a lot more often than with girls. And a lot of the commonly recognized behaviors … are stuff that is more common in guys than in girls.

Teachers generated broad, microaggressive assumptions about how students of color and female autistic students do and should behave.

Social messages

Subtheme 1: Peers stigmatize autistic students. Participants described stress and fear of being stigmatized because of their peers' ableist conceptions of autistic people. David, a 15-year-old White boy, expressed ongoing fear that his peers, having narrow views of autistic individuals' speech patterns, would view his speech as scripted:

Table 3. Themes in Response to Research Question 2

How do individuals engage with these external messages about autism in the school context as they develop their identities?

Theme/subtheme	*Definition*	*Example quotation*
Reclaiming their identities		
1. Active choices about identity disclosure	Participants make active choices about when and to whom to disclose their autism identity; these choices reflect awareness of the risks of disclosure. Intersecting social identities also influence disclosure decisions.	''It's not something that I really dwell on much at all except when people know something is clearly off with me. And I tell them it's Asperger's just because I don't want them to think it's anything worse.''
2. Embracing autism strengths	Participants identify personal strengths that they attribute to their autism; elevating these strengths is a form of resistance to autism stigma.	''I was put in different [special education] programs when I was younger, … and I do feel like it might've made me somewhat more isolated from my classmates. But at the same time, I feel like that's made me more compassionate too.''
3. Redefining and reframing autism	Participants took control of their autism identity by asserting their own definitions of autism and critiquing existing classifications, definitions, and stereotypes.	''It presents so widely differently in people, that it's both unfair and incredibly rude to assume that autistic people are by definition less intelligent or more intelligent because that's not fair either. They're not more or less anything. It's just different.''

> I don't want them to think that I'm, like, scripted. Like some people think that people with autism who sound completely normal are like scripted, like how I'm not actually thinking these thoughts right now, I'm just thinking, ''Oh what can I say to sound normal.''

Another student described peers' negative assumptions about their academic ability. Taylor's peers could not accept that she was autistic because she was considered smart:

> Because that was a thing I got a lot, not from teachers. Teachers never said this. But sort of you hear from other people, ''Wait. You can't be autistic. You're smart.'' And I'm like, ''Excuse me.''

Esme, an 18-year-old Mexican and White woman, described peers as being uncomfortable interacting with her because of her autistic identity:

> If anything, it was always the other students who just sort of, either were intimidated by me because I was kind of loud when I was littler, or they just thought I was weird because they didn't know much about—''Oh, she has autism, so she does things a little bit differently.'' So, I don't know, I feel it's just the other students not really knowing more so than the teacher.

Peers displayed narrow understandings of autism, showed discomfort in interacting with autistic students, and held limited views of the capabilities of autistic students. Peer perceptions detrimentally impacted autistic students' social experiences and views of themselves.

Subtheme 2: Social experiences vary by students' intersectional identities. Participants described how their intersectional identities influenced their social experiences. Natalia described a traumatic experience with a peer who took advantage of her as an autistic girl:

> He was kind of the center of this friend group. And he would show me porn on his computer and also threaten to cut my throat out and sexually enjoy it. And in some ways I just didn't understand what those were boundaries that I needed to have. And later when I felt bad and crappy, I was like, ''What is this?'' I think it's an experience a lot of autistic women go through …and I think we all kind of struggle with understanding where and how do we set boundaries to keep ourselves safe.

In being threatened and sexually harassed by an adolescent boy, Natalia perceived her autistic characteristics as contributing to why she did not see the harm in that moment. Her autistic identity intersected with her gender in being targeted for predatory behavior.

Participants' autistic identity was meaningfully impacted by the peers and teachers with whom they interacted in the school context. Overall, participants reported receiving consistently negative stigmatizing messages about their autism and intersecting identities from teachers and peers.

How do individuals engage with these school-based external messages as they develop their identities?

Reclaiming their identities. While peers and teachers were powerful conduits of autism stigma, participants also actively pushed back against these stigmatizing messages. Participants reclaimed their identities by making choices around disclosing their autism and other identities, elevating their strengths, and reframing autism.

Subtheme 1: Active choices about identity disclosure. One way in which participants asserted power over their identities was in choosing when, how, and to whom to disclose their autism. Participants resisted stigmatizing, deficit-focused messages and managed the risks of disclosure. These disclosure decisions also intersected with decisions around disclosing or embodying their other identities, including

mental health, race, and ethnicity. David disclosed his autistic identity to out-of-school friends but feared the social ramifications of disclosing to his school friends. This decision-making intersected with his mental health identity, as he reported greater comfort talking about his obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and ADHD than about his autistic identity:

> I know there's people, like I don't want to say anything, at least in my high school. Like I know if it came out, there'd be certain kids in my school who are like—like there are kids outside of school who know, but if I talked about it at school, people would be like—they might talk about it with me. Like I openly talk about, like, other stuff like OCD and ADHD because it's part of like, I feel like I have some attention issues, and like I have obsessive, I obsess about certain things. But like I don't really want to talk about my Asperger's, because that seems like more of a big deal for some reason.

For participants of color, disclosure decisions were influenced by their intersecting racial and ethnic identities. Natalia, who identified as White, Black, and Latina, described struggling with her decision to emphasize her race and ethnicity more than her autistic identity, facilitated by the visual aspects of her race and ethnicity, compared with the relative invisibility of autism:

> And my Latinidad was very different than my autisticness, my autism. And subsequently, between the dual pressures of being Latina and between being autistic, I chose to be Latina then I guess. And that's kind of what I really focused on performing until I got into college because I guess in many ways all identities are, not I mean not completely, but all identities in our larger sociology of everything are based on performance, and I performed being a person of color. And that's what I chose to be. …There aren't really visual signifiers of autism but there are of race… and it was easier to try not to be autistic than it was to not be Black.

Participants were judicious in choosing when and to whom to disclose their autistic identity, driven by self-protection to resist stigma. Disclosure decisions were also impacted by intersecting identities, including choosing to disclose mental health conditions rather than their more stigmatizing autistic identity and choosing to embrace one's racial and ethnic identities, as more visible than autism.

Subtheme 2: Embracing autistic strengths. Participants identified strengths that they attributed to their autistic identity. These included attention to detail, strong interests and deep knowledge about specific topics, and creativity. Participants resisted stigma by embracing their strengths, which helped them in their professional work, academics, and social experiences. Timothy described the strong interests that he attributed to autism as propelling his academic success:

> [My autism] probably helped in terms of making me a better reader because I was just really interested in the stuff my teacher, as in Mrs. [Last Name], taught. I get very obsessive. It's affecting me very badly right now, my obsession. But, it's had its positive bits in school.

When teachers capitalized on students' areas of interest, this further engaged them in academic experiences. Hannah, a gender-fluid White and Native American 22-year old, shared, ''Use the hyper interest. They're one of the autistic kid's best tools to work with.'' Strengths attributed to autism, such as attention to detail, also helped them professionally:

> I think part of the reason that I have the job that I currently do is related to being autistic, because [my supervisor] specifically looks for people who can sift through a lot of very detailed information over a long period of time. And that's something that comes with being autistic, … just because we do have that very detailed way of approaching information.

These strengths also helped participants connect with others, including making friends, finding a peer group, and having compassion for others. Esme, a high school senior, explained that her interest and knowledge about history, which she associates with her autistic identity, supported her in connecting with peers:

> But one positive way [autism] affected me is that just the way that my brain works, and a lot of people with autism—I've heard this from just in the community online and people I know—if they're fascinated by topics, they'll remember more stuff about it. And so I know all sorts of useless trivia about the American Revolution, for example. And I ended up kind of being a hero with my academic league. I was MVP….

Esme associated this interest with helping her form friendships, going on to say: ''So I found a way to make the best of how I think and I made some friends in that group and it's been a really good experience.'' In this sense, her autism not only enabled her to excel in this niche, but also to find friends with common interests.

Others described how autism was central, not secondary, to their emerging identities. Natalia described autism as a ''framing device'' for her development.

> Autism has … definitely been involved in pretty much all of my either great joys or struggles. I feel like it's like a framing device for so much of what my experiences have been. It's sort of, like, influenced my growth and my intellectual interests and my strengths and my hobbies and relationships and sort of how I've come to see the world.

Overall, participants described resisting stigmatizing and deficit-oriented messages, which had the potential to diminish their self-worth, by instead embracing the strengths they attributed to their autistic identity. These acts of resistance enabled them to hold more affirming, balanced autistic identities.

Subtheme 3: Redefining and reframing autism. Participants took an active empowered stance in negotiating their autistic identities by asserting and reclaiming autism definitions. Participants critiqued stereotypes, definitions, and autism symptoms. Cameron described autism as marked by a different thinking process, rather than as a disability, positing that nonautistic people ought to recognize and accept this difference:

> Like people ask for a general definition of Asperger's or autism, but we have a different process of thinking. It might be longer, it might be shorter, but it is not the typical process. It might not be the process the rest of the world uses, but it works for us.

In describing her autistic identity and co-occurring ADHD, Taylor refutes a medical model of disability in favor of a social model, in which autism is understood as disabling to the extent that one's context is unaccommodating of neurodiversity:

> It's not a disability in and of itself. It can become a disability if the environment is hostile to it … And I feel like that's a thing that a lot of people have a hard time quantifying because human brains naturally want to put things in a hierarchy. You naturally want to say, ''Okay, well if you're this then you are above or below the average.'' But the idea of taking ''it's not above or below, it's adjacent'' is hard for a lot of people but this is what it is.

Participants asserted diverse views with regard to functioning labels (i.e., high-functioning autism, low-functioning). Arman, a 19-year-old Hispanic man, uses this distinction as part of how he describes his autistic identity: ''I'm high functioning to where I can talk and act like a normal person.'' His description of ''normal'' may have been referring to someone without the autistic label and speaks to the range of views the participants held about their autism.

Meanwhile, Taylor pushes back against stereotypes. Taylor described her reaction to her peers thinking that autistic people do not care about social relationships:

> I am perfectly content to just chill, but I also would like to have friends. And it's genuinely bizarre to me that this is apparently a thought that ''[autistic people] just entirely don't give a shit.'' I mean, sure, maybe I'm a little less reliant on it, but I would like to have friends. I'm not a fucking robot.

Participants actively critiqued existing conceptions, and misconceptions, of autism and asserted more affirming perspectives. Participants' opinions were unique from one another. They reflected an intentional effort to reclaim autism for themselves and to challenge the assumptions that they encountered in the school context.

Discussion

This study examined first-person perspectives of autistic participants' identity development in school. Teachers and peers sent stigmatizing, ableist, deficit-oriented messages about their autistic identity, and the nature of these messages was impacted by participants' other intersecting identities. Participants were also empowered and forthright in resisting stigma, actively pushing back against negative messages from peers and teachers, finding affirmation and strengths in their experiences, and reclaiming their autistic identity and intersecting identities. Consistent with RMMDI, these acts of resistance, such as reframing stigmatizing views of autism and race, and focusing on strengths of autism, were meaning-making filters for autistic adolescents and adults in refuting oppressive messages imposed by the society.[16]

Messages from teachers and peers influence identity development

In their interactions with teachers, participants reported that teachers often saw only their autism label and acted on assumptions associated with that label to stigmatize their autistic students. Teachers filtered autistic students' actions and needs through an autism ''filter,'' attributing their behaviors only to their autistic identity and narrowing their expectations for autistic students. Disability-specific labels may have served to provide them with extra support in areas of academic and social–emotional needs; however, students were ''often reduced to their label'' and viewed unidimensionally,[37(p. 23)] which may have the consequence of neglecting students' other identities, strengths, and needs. Rather than focusing on the autism label, and only the needs associated with it, educators should acknowledge and address the multiple intersecting identities of students in their classrooms.

Intersectionality emerged to account for teachers' and peers' treatment of autistic students. Teachers' messages and attitudes toward autistic students varied in relation to the students' intersecting identities. This bias is consistent with the continuing legacy of teacher education programs and school systems as settings that are implicitly aimed at reinforcing ''normalcy'' in students, defined as whiteness,[48] ability,[49] and cis-hetero patriarchy.[18,50,51] For instance, participants of color and female participants talked about conceptions of autism not including them and feeling like they did not fit into teachers' and peers' ideas about autism.

Furthermore, participants of color described how their experiences with teachers reinforced whiteness as the default in the context of autism. As a result, school settings missed opportunities to embrace and affirm the diversity of students' capacities.[34] Within this ableist school culture, it is not surprising that nonautistic students also internalize autism stigma and enact these biases toward their autistic peers. Indeed, participants described ostracism, rejection, and victimization in relation to their autistic identity and to their intersecting gender and mental health. As such, nonautistic peers inadvertently served as the conduit for these messages toward their autistic peers.

Autistic students resist stigma and reclaim their identities

Three themes captured how participants resisted stigma from teachers and peers and reclaimed their identities. Participants made active decisions about when, how, and to whom to disclose their identities, embraced their autism-related strengths, and redefined their autism in ways that facilitated a more affirming autistic identity.

With regard to disclosure, participants often chose to conceal their autistic identity or mask autistic characteristics. These decisions are consistent with the idea of identity as a curated presentation of self, serving an impression management function for an identity that is devalued.[52–54] Masking one's autistic identity and emphasizing an identity that is more visually apparent or less stigmatizing are unsurprising given the deficit-oriented societal messages attributed to autism.[55] While choosing when to disclose is on the surface a marker of empowerment, Pearson and Rose describe this as an ''illusion of choice,'' as this decision-making is better viewed as a stigma management strategy in the context of oppression rather than an empowered liberated choice.

Participants also embraced the strengths they associated with their autistic identity. Students viewed these strengths as enhancing their social relationships, academic development, and work experiences. In the face of stigma from teachers and peers, autistic students resisted these ableist, deficit-oriented messages in favor of more empowering, adaptive, and affirming views of autism. Interventions for autistic youth and

adults should take a strengths-based approach, grounded in presumed competence, rather than the approach of addressing or resolving supposed deficits.[56,57] The majority of autistic adults prefer a strengths-focused approach and report being negatively impacted by interventions that focus on reducing autistic characteristics, such as social skills trainings that promote conforming to neurotypical expectations.[58,59]

Third, participants actively redefined and reframed their autistic identity, often in ways that were affirming of neurodiversity, resisted a medical model of autism, and questioned the power structure behind our understanding of autism.[60] Individuals challenged deficit-based definitions and called out ableist ways that others defined autism. Botha and colleagues[29] found that autistic adults who ''reframed and reclaimed'' their label did so to manage stigma and push back against the negative messages about autism. Our participants expressed similar views in how they defined autism (preferences around identity-first vs. person-first language) and understood ''language as liberation.''[29]

These empowering themes, embracing autistic strengths and redefining autism, reflect an internal meaning-making filter consistent with RMMDI.[16] These adolescents and emerging adults were creating their own, affirming autistic identities in relation to their other salient identities. Furthermore, individuals' social context shaped which identities were more or less salient and which identities participants chose to emphasize as they pushed back against oppressive messages.

The meaning-making process is further exemplified in how participants embraced strengths related to their autistic identity that are often viewed as challenges, such as strong interests or intense attention to details. Timothy described his ''obsession'' and his dogged style in pursuing interests as assets to his academic performance. Similarly, Hannah spoke about how their ''hyperinterest'' helps them in a job where attention to detail is important. The intersectional process by which participants made choices about emphasizing certain identities, consistent with the RMMDI, reflects an acute way to manage stigma. Natalia's comment exemplifies this: ''between the dual pressures of being Latina and between being autistic, I chose to be Latina then.''

Finally, participants challenged societal definitions of autism, reclaiming their own meanings; for example, Taylor asserted that autism is only a disability ''if the environment is hostile to it'' and described autism as not above or below nonautistic ways of functioning, but rather as ''adjacent'' to them.

Implications for improving school and workplace experiences

Our findings offer directions for improving the school context, as well as higher education and the workplace. Among U.S. high schoolers, those with multiple marginalized identities—specifically girls with disabilities, multiracial students with disabilities, and LGBTQ students with disabilities—are at highest risk of suicidal ideation and school disconnectedness. Teachers should support autistic students to develop social connections in school[14] and should use their power to shape autistic and nonautistic students' views of autism. Teacher training should support them to avoid perpetuating ableism, and instead to be ''visionaries'' and activists, leading the way to affirm and include autistic students in the school context.[61(p. 87)]

The school is an important context to connect with autistic peers, experience better autistic representation, and build an autistic community.[2,36,62] Although participants rarely expressed the absence of these factors explicitly, opportunities to build an autistic community or recognize autistic role models were few. Opportunities to engage in activism and to work collectively with like-minded others may also promote a positive sense of self.[63]

The use of masking to cope with stigma, which may begin in school, continues in higher education and the workplace. At the same time, autistic students are also developing a voice in school and asserting opinions about their identities, a valuable skill as they negotiate potentially ableist employment and higher education environments. Workplaces should create an atmosphere fostering disclosure and acceptance and reducing stigma among employees.[64] Indeed, autistic employee training and employment programs that are collaborative, multidisciplinary, and affirming of autism are successful in retaining autistic employees.[65] Likewise, higher education settings that support disclosure will enable autistic students to better advocate for supports when needed.

Limitations and future directions

While we centered first-person autistic perspectives through interviews, and engaged autistic participants in member checking, our interpretations were inevitably reflective of the researchers' nonautistic identities. Although the research team did not include any autistic team members, our participants, and especially the two in-depth interviewees, provided valuable input into the identification and interpretation of themes. Future research should center autistic individuals as researchers in all aspects of the study design, analysis, and interpretation.[45,66] Consistent with the DisCrit and Critical Autism Studies frameworks, systemic change toward more affirming educational contexts requires centering the perspectives of autistic people with multiple marginalized identities.[18] In addition, our interview did not explicitly ask participants to reflect separately on each of their intersecting identities in relation to their autistic identity, even though many participants spontaneously did so.

Further research with an intersectionality lens will help combat the deficit orientation dominant in autism research.[67] Furthermore, our sample size was small for a grounded theory-informed study; while we observed saturation in our overarching themes (e.g., Teacher Messages, Social Messages, and Reclaiming Their Identities), our sample was limited by funding restrictions. Our target population was purposefully identified to reflect a range of social identities and to include participants both in and out of school. However, a more diverse sample would have strengthened our methodology, for instance, by better elucidating the experiences of understudied groups including autistic individuals of color or those who identify as trans* or gender nonconforming.[41]

Furthermore, because we only interviewed one type of participant (autistic people, but not their teachers or peers, e.g.), we did not engage in triangulation among varied data sources.[68] Similarly, while we engaged in member checking with two participants, stronger future research would engage in member checking with all participants. Finally, our sample may not capture experiences of people with high communication support needs.

Conclusion

School is an important context in which autistic individuals develop their identities. Teachers and peers send stigmatizing messages about autism, which are further molded by autistic students' other marginalized identities such as gender, race, and mental health. Autistic participants actively resisted this stigma, instead highlighting their strengths, reframing and redefining autism, and making thoughtful decisions about their disclosure of autism in relation to other intersecting identities.

Authorship Confirmation Statement

Dr. Shana Cohen conceptualized the article, performed the first and second phases of coding and analysis alongside other coauthors, guided the coding and analytic decisions for the article, engaged in interpretation of findings, and wrote major portions of the article. Ms. Kohrissa Joseph engaged in the second phase of coding and data analysis alongside the coauthors, engaged in article conceptualization and interpretation of findings, and wrote portions of the article. Dr. Sarah Levinson assisted in conceptualizing the original study design, contributed to the interview protocol, conducted all interviews, engaged in study coordination, and engaged in the first phase of coding along with the coauthors. Dr. Jan Blacher contributed to the original study design and provided input during the data collection, interview interpretation, and coding process. Dr. Abbey Eisenhower conceptualized the original study, contributed to the interview protocol and study coordination, performed the first and second rounds of coding and analysis alongside the coauthors, engaged in article conceptualization and interpretation of findings, and wrote portions of the article. All coauthors revised the article and approved the final version. This article has been submitted solely to this journal and is not published elsewhere.

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