



# *AUTISTIC IDENTITY*

WEBINAR · DISCUSSION · Q&A

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Group**

Providing Independent Advocacy



**Leeds  
Autism  
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**Bradford  
and Craven  
Autism AIM**

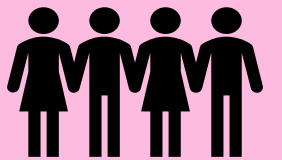
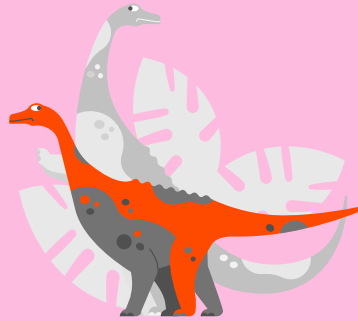
# WHAT WILL WE DISCUSS?

- What we mean by 'identity' and how it relates to autism.
- The impact of an autism diagnosis (sometimes including self-ID) on how we see ourselves.
- How others see us (including 'minority stress') – and why it matters.
- The 'autistic community', wellbeing, and self-esteem.



# AUTISTIC PEOPLE ACROSS TIME

- Autistic superior pattern recognition (O’Riordan et al., 2001), possibility of clear advantages in hunter-gatherer societies.
- During the first 100,000 years of *homo sapiens* advantages arising from ability to distinguish animal footprints from random impressions by a river; tell edible plants from poisonous ones; pick up bird distress calls as early warning of large predators (Waltz, 2013).
- Tréhin (2002), study of cave art from the Palaeolithic period suggests that some autism-related traits (particularly of Savant syndrome) may have played a key role in pushing forward human evolution.
- Most ‘less adaptive’ traits of autism strongly dependent on environment, while others are a constant with different social explanations (Lewis, 2003; Waltz, 2013).
- Moving towards ‘minority’ identity group – part of wider disability minority movement and social conceptualisation of impact of disability (Botha and Frost, 2020)



# IDENTITY - WHAT DO WE MEAN?

- Autistic identity has been defined as having two key components (Davies et al., 2024):
- **Personal identity** - defining yourself according to individual characteristics and how this self-definition influences choices through life (e.g., education, career) (e.g., Kenny et al., 2015).
- E.g., choosing a career that aligns with common autistic strengths.
- **Social identity** (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) - belonging to particular social groups influences a person's identity.
- E.g., Experiencing strong feelings of solidarity and connectedness with other autistic people.
- *Context-dependent* (e.g., influence of surrounding views of autism) and *reciprocal* (weak autistic personal identity leads to weak solidarity with other autistic people) (Albarello et al., 2018)

# IDENTITY AND SELF-ESTEEM AFTER AN AUTISM DIAGNOSIS

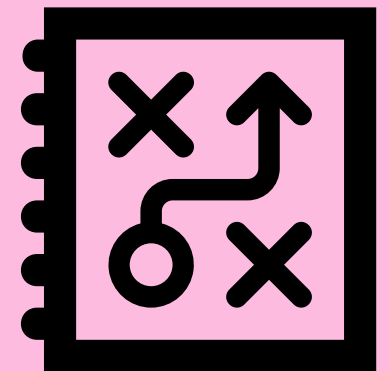
- Corden, Brewer, and Cage (2021), did a study including a quantitative questionnaire (151 participants) and a qualitative question (54 responses) exploring self-esteem, psychological wellbeing, and personal identity among adults diagnosed with autism.
- Interested in experience of 'autism as part of me'.
- Found that the greater the time elapsed after diagnosis the less dissatisfaction there was with autistic identity.
- Found that autistic pride predicted greater self-esteem, with negative feelings about being autistic predicting low self-esteem.
- The 54 qualitative responses supported these findings and suggest an emotive post-diagnosis adjustment process.
- Suggests a complex 'journey' post-diagnosis - understanding of 'self' and 'exoneration' for perceived failings but also learning to navigate stigma.

# A JOURNEY (C O R D E N , B R E W E R , A N D C A G E , 2 0 2 1 )

- “[The diagnosis] led me to re-evaluate my life;” “It changed everything. Things finally made sense.”
- “I felt relieved;” “I was upset, confused and angry.”
- “Sometimes now I feel a bit sad about my autism because I know I am always going to find things difficult;”
- “Confirmed I was different and would never be normal.”
- “It took time, but I read around a lot, learned online...”; “Mostly I’ve learned from other people online about how to help myself.”
- “Why had not it [autism] been picked up sooner?;” “It was a double-edged sword though as it also caused anger since no one has noticed for so long.”
- “People said my diagnosis is fake;” “People do not understand autism.”
- “I was very self-conscious and lost confidence;” “Sometimes it feels lonely. I do not always feel like I have much in common with other autistic people, so I’m not always sure where I fit in or belong”

# A JOURNEY (CORDEN, BREWER, AND CAGE, 2021)

- “[I’m] learning to be proud of my autism;” “Autism is an attribute.”
- “[I’m] more confident asking for accommodations;” “By being able to advocate for my needs, discrimination that happened in the past happens less after the initial denial of services.”
- “This is how my brain works;” “I’ve fully embraced my neurology.”
- “I give myself space to be me;” “[I’m] letting myself be the real me.”
- “[It’s] good to know why I felt different;” “I think probably the diagnosis has helped me more than not as I know myself better.”



# ...AS OTHERS SEE US.

I don't see you any differently since your diagnosis

Why would you want to make yourself into a victim?

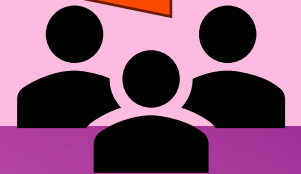
You don't seem autistic to me

My friend's son is autistic and you're nothing like him

You seem more autistic since you were diagnosed...

Why would you want to identify with your disability though?

Aren't we all a bit autistic, though?



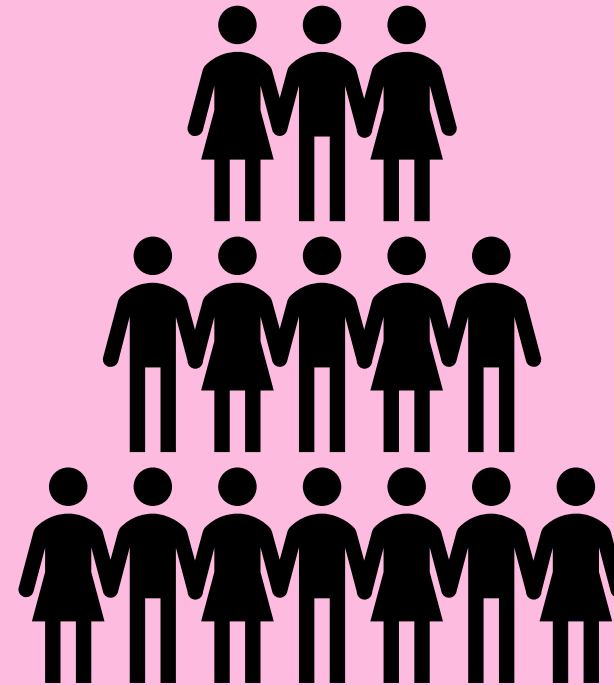


# MINORITY STRESS (BOTH A AND FROST, 2020)

- *'Neurominority'*
- Labelling - 'labels absorb the meaning[s] society gives them'
- 9 of the top 10 terms used by non-autistic people to describe autistics are negative (Wood and Freeth 2016).
- Minority Stress (Schwarz and Meyer, 2010), commonly used to explain disparities in physical and mental health (sex, race, disability) - 4 premises:
  - Not all differences are discrepancies (increase in effect of an illness with age is to be expected and is therefore not a discrepancy).
  - Based on law of averages and average effects (the fact that a member of the subgroup remains unaffected by social disadvantage does not falsify the overall theory).
  - Social stress theory applies causally to overall health rather than specific disorders.
  - About the disadvantage produced by exclusionary social hierarchies rather than anything specific to that group - i.e., the group is devalued on the basis of societal norms.

# MINORITY STRESS (BOTH A AND FROST, 2020)

- Survey (n = 111; self-ID)
  - *Victimisation*
  - *Discrimination*
  - *Everyday/covert discrimination (microaggressions)*
  - **Expectation of rejection**
  - *Outness*
  - Internalised stigma
  - **Physical concealment of autism**



- Leading to additional stress burden faced by autistic people – possibly preventable factor in mental health and wellbeing disparity facing autistic community.

# AUTISTIC COMMUNITY

- Development of autistic identity (Davies et al., 2024)
- Cultural modelling and validation
- Shared vocabulary
- Building rapport (Crompton et al., 2020a; Rifai et al., 2020)
- Positive impact on mental health (Davies et al., 2024)
- 'I never realised everybody felt as happy as I do when I am around autistic people' (Crompton et al., 2020b)
- Addressing impact of trauma/'minority stress' (Botha and Frost 2018)
- Community variation (heterogeneity)
- Importance of choice (not forcing matches based on diagnosis)



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