

Autistic Women’s Friendship and Well-being

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autistica

Background

- ❖ Lack of autistic adults' perspectives in friendship research → Current understanding of autistic people's social lives mostly built on research with children or adolescents (Myles et al., 2019; Petrina et al., 2014.)
- ❖ Gender differences in friendship experiences have been indicated by recent studies (Kanfischer et al., 2017; Sedgewick et al., 2019).
- ❖ Lack of adult women's voices in autism research (Cook et al., 2018)
- ❖ Masking/camouflaging and autistic burnout are important issues for autistic women and in need of further exploration (Cook et al., 2018).

Aims

- ❖ In-depth exploration of autistic women's (including those who identify as non-binary or transgender) experiences of friendship for a more detailed and balanced view of the social lives of autistic adults.
- ❖ Comparing answers to a commonly used friendship questionnaire with experiences shared in the interviews to identify similarities and discrepancies.
- ❖ To get a better understanding of how autistic women's well-being is impacted by their friendships and social lives, including reflections on the pandemic.

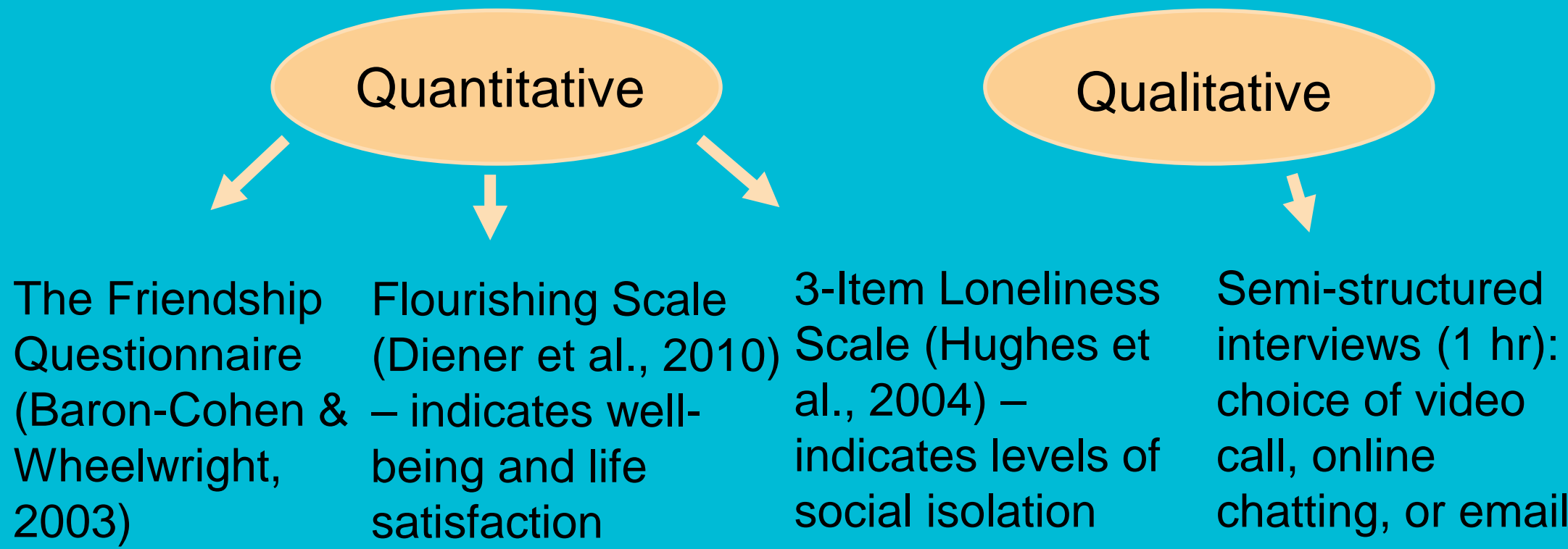
Methods

Participants

Women (N=75) who were diagnosed or identified as autistic were recruited with the help of Autistica. Sub-set (n=31) of participants took part in the qualitative part of the study too. See Table 1 for demographic information.

Design and Measures

Mixed-methods approach



Procedure

- ❖ Interview questions addressed past and current friendships, sense of belonging, the meaning and importance of friendship, the impact of the pandemic, and reflections on their psychological well-being.
- ❖ Transcriptions and email interviews are currently being analysed in NVivo, applying Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- ❖ Questionnaires were distributed using Qualtrics and descriptive summaries were created in SPSS to compare with scores from previous studies.
- ❖ Debrief email – included a range of support websites and organisations.
- ❖ Prize draw for five online retail vouchers worth £20.

Table 1

Participant demographics (N=75)

Age group	n	%
18 - 24	8	10.7
25 - 34	12	16
35 - 44	24	32
45 - 54	22	29.3
55 - 64	7	9.3
65 - 74	1	1.3
Prefer not to answer	1	1.3
Ethnicity	n	%
White/Caucasian	63	84
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	3	4
Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups	5	6.7
Not listed	1	1.3
Prefer not to answer	3	4
Gender identity	n	%
Female	65	86.7
Transgender	1	1.3
Non-binary	8	10.7
Not listed	1	1.3

Preliminary results and findings

Friendship Questionnaire

- ❖ Autistic women from the present study scored higher than the autistic men in Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright (2003), but substantially lower than their neurotypical women sample.
- ❖ 46.7% of participants achieved the midpoint score of 70 or more, whereas in Baron Cohen's study only 23.5% of the autistic group (men and women) scored this high. In contrast, 85.7% of the neurotypical women scored 70 or higher in Baron Cohen's sample.

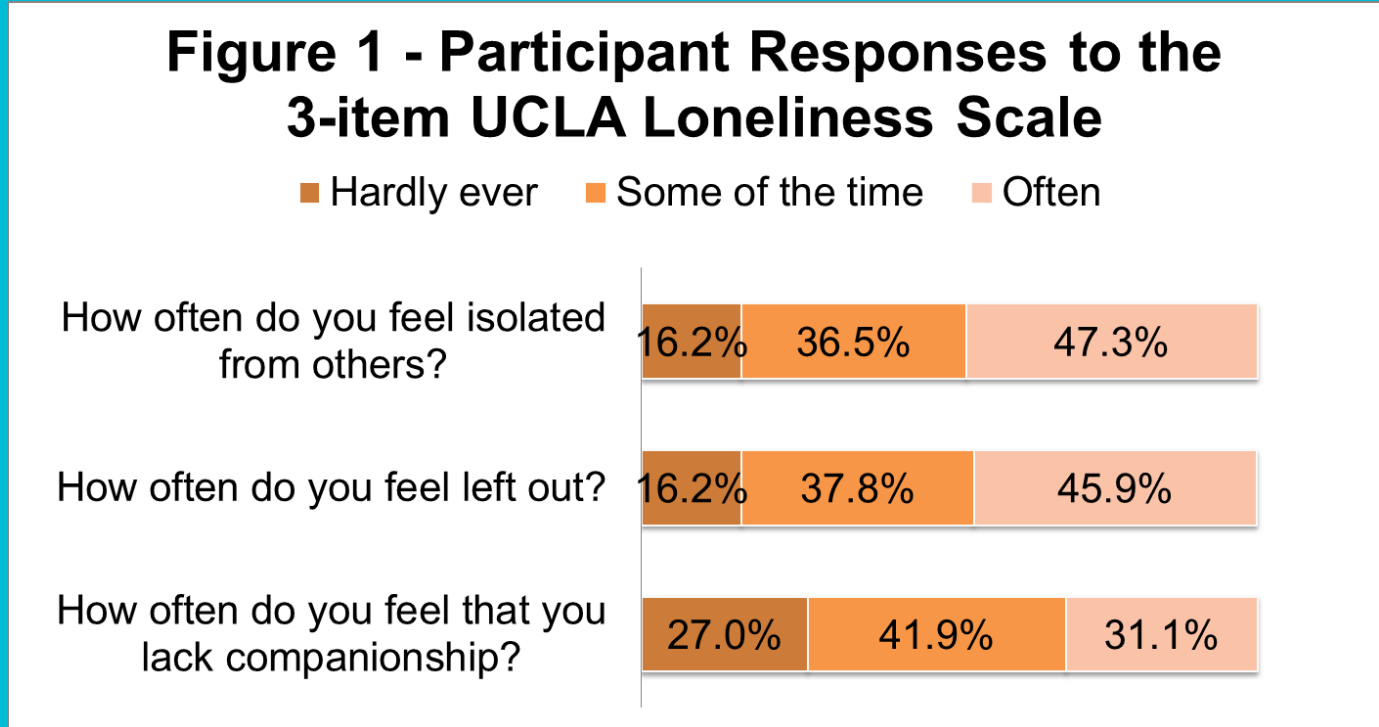
Table 2

Comparison of Friendship Questionnaire scores with those from a previous study

	Current study	Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright (2003)				
	Autistic females	Autistic females	Autistic males	Neurotypical females	Neurotypical males	
Mean	69.3	59.8	53.2	90	70.3	
SD	19.8	25.1	18.3	16.1	15.7	
n	75	17	51	49	27	

3-Item Loneliness Scale

- ❖ Figure 1 summarises percentages of participant responses ($M=6.6$; $SD=1.9$) to each item on the loneliness scale (highest possible score 9, lowest 3).



Flourishing Scale

- ❖ While the current mean score ($M=26$; $SD=9.2$) suggests a low level of flourishing in life across the board, a closer look at the individual items reveal a more nuanced picture.
- ❖ Over 60% of the participants felt that their social relationships were supportive and rewarding, they led a meaningful life, and they actively contributed to their happiness and well-being.
- ❖ On the other hand, only about 50% of them were optimistic about their futures or felt respected by other people.

Emerging themes from the interviews

The value of neurodiverse friendships

"I would say that neurodiverse friendships are very nice to have (...) We are more likely to have shared experiences (...) We are less worried about how the other person sees us and appearing 'normal' – we see each other and ourselves as a bit wacky and eccentric and that being a lovable thing, when reflected in the other – helps it to be lovable and acceptable in ourselves, too." (Chel)

Social challenges of young adulthood

"...as an adult it is kind of like a lot of the support kind of goes away (...) at university there's lots of groups and stuff you can join that as an adult not really sure." (Bella)

Motivation to mask changes over time

"I used to have many friends and go out often. Now I'm just too tired of masking, so I prefer to be on my own most of the time." (Amy)

"I was probably kind of weird, so I guess I was just trying to be more normal around them. (...) I think I'm a lot happier now (...) I don't really have any friends and sort of more...more myself, I think back then I was just trying to fit in just to have friends (...) it was difficult." (Bella)

Quality over quantity in friendships

"Has to be a real friendship – I would rather have no friends than friends who I don't connect with." (BattyPip)

"I have a tendency to prefer close relationships over shallow ones and quality over quantity." (Agatha)

Preliminary implications

Transition to adulthood

- ❖ Young adulthood → particularly challenging time for autistic women, often filled with depression and loneliness. Among other factors, discontinued social support after leaving education can make it very hard to make new friends and to navigate the social landscape of adult life shaped by neurotypical norms and expectations.
- ❖ Supports the statement of Pesonen et al. (2015): "providing social assistance and positive life experiences during emerging adulthood (ages 18-25) seems to matter most in forming a strong sense of belonging." (pp. 73.)
- ❖ Mentoring programmes such as the Healthy Relationships on the Autism Spectrum (Rothman et al., 2022) online class, co-created with autistic people, can be a fruitful direction forward.

Autistic community connectedness

- ❖ Many participants reported close friendships with other autistic or neurodivergent individuals. These were often described as more accepting, less stressful, and more genuine than friendships with neurotypical people.
- ❖ This is in line with the findings of Botha et al. (2022), as in autistic community connectedness might play an important role in protecting the mental health of autistic people and in providing a sense of belonging, confidence and happiness.
- ❖ The theme also points towards the importance of wider autism acceptance in society where autistic individuals do not have to face judgement and stigma for having different social norms.

Loneliness and desire for friendship

- ❖ Supportive of the findings of a recent systematic review on loneliness in autistic adults (Umagami et al, 2022), the current interviews and friendship questionnaire scores highlighted that meaningful friendships are very important to autistic women despite how challenging they find them. Participants longed for deep connection and many of them reported having at least one close friend.
- ❖ Nevertheless, both questionnaire and interview data were in agreement about loneliness and social isolation being an on-going difficulty for autistic women throughout adulthood. On the other hand, spending time alone was a necessity for most interviewees and was not the same as feeling lonely. Future autistic community-led research is warranted in this area to co-produce possible means to address issues of social isolation.

Conclusion

Although the analysis is still in progress, a number of important insights have already surfaced from the questionnaires and personal accounts as discussed above. Overall, participants shared stories about the difficulties and joys of making and maintaining friendships and considered having at least one close friend to be essential for their well-being. Moreover, there appeared to be a tendency for increased self-acceptance and reduced masking of autistic traits with age. This emphasises the invaluable role autistic adults and women in particular can play in the future development of research and peer mentoring schemes.

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