

Autism & Sexuality



Dr. Mark Stokes

Associate Professor of Psychology at Deakin University
1st July 2021

Discussant: Kirstin Greaves-Lord, Ph.D.

Moderator: Marika Coffman, Ph.D.

Student & Trainee Committee Chair: Alana McVey, Ph.D.



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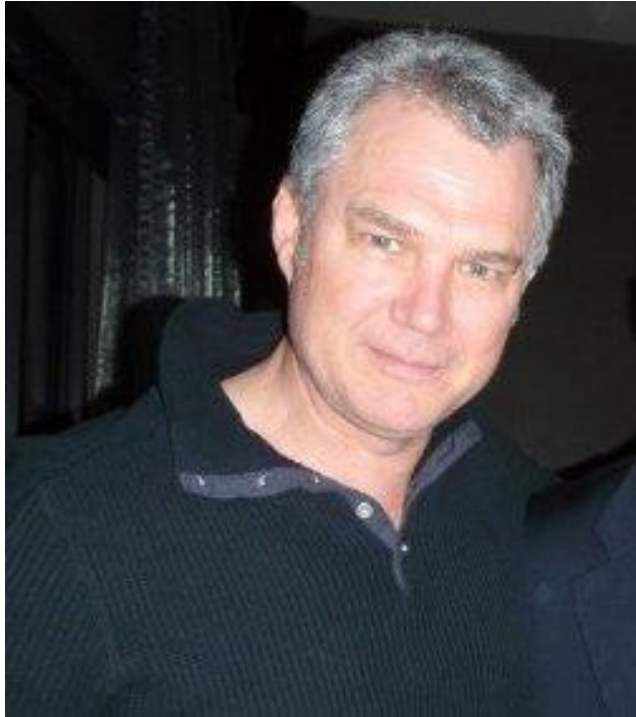
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Autism & Sexuality

Speaker



Dr. Mark Stokes

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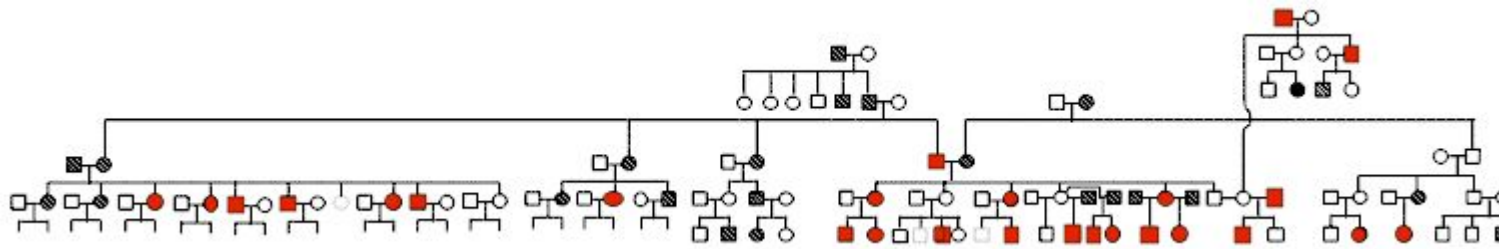
Discussant



Dr. Kirstin Greaves-Lord

University of Groningen,
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Sexuality & Autism

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Language

Identity first language will be used herein. While we recognize the presence of debate with some preferring identity-first and others preferring person-first language, recent work suggests identity-first language is more widely preferred by members of the community (Kenny et al., 2016).

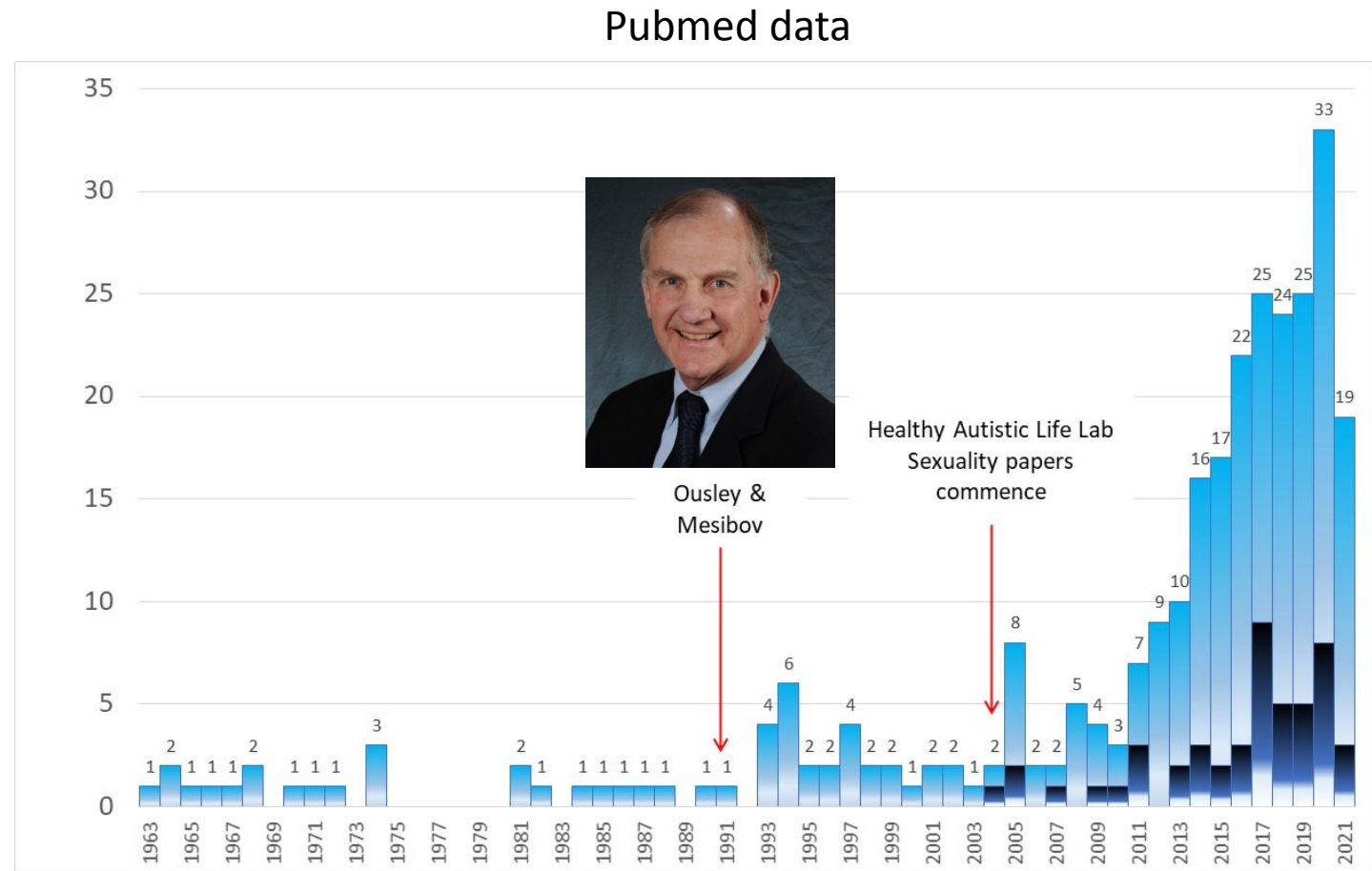
We use culturally accepted terms such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, together with “LGBTQIA+” when referring to sexual orientation.

We use transgender men and transgender women when referring to females assigned at birth with a male gender identity and males assigned at birth with a female gender identity respectively.

Language preferences and how it is perceived may change over time and in the future our current usage might be felt inappropriate.

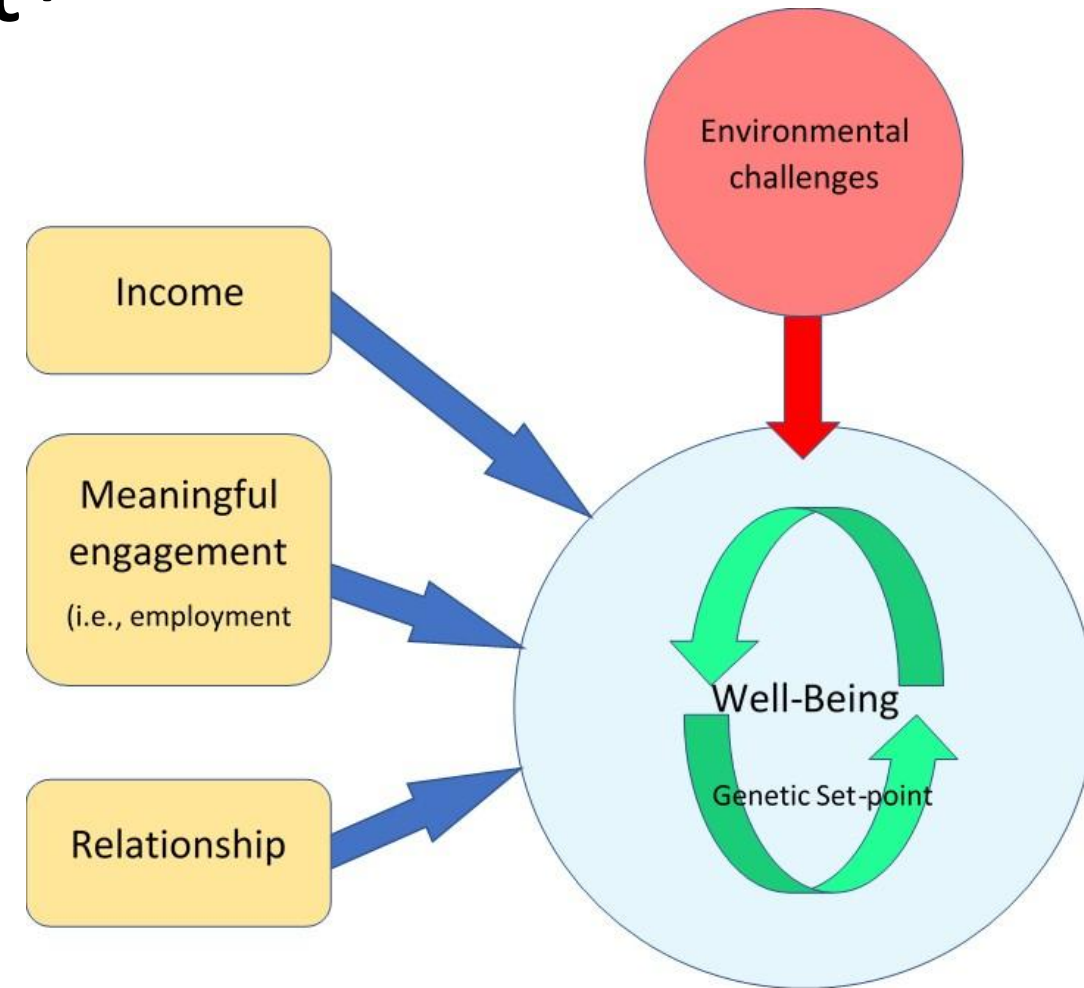
For any injury due to language use, we apologise. Our intention is to be inclusive while describing the research.

- Early citations before Ousley & Mesibov (1991) primarily concerned with:
 - Case studies of aberrant behavior
 - Parental concerns
 - Psychodynamic analyses of sexuality within developmental stage
 - Opinion papers on intervention possibilities



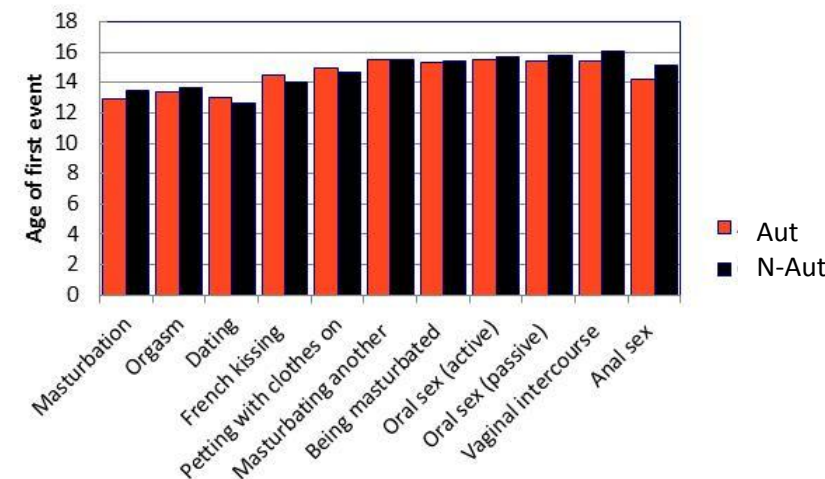
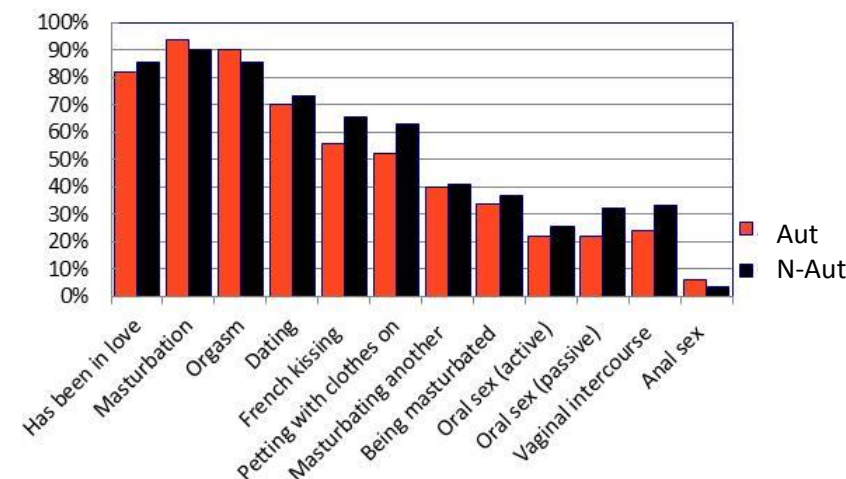
Why is sexuality important?

- Well-being is an indicator of mental health, and generally sought as an end in itself
- Individual homeostatic set-point driven by:
 - Personality (adaptation, resilience) & Genetic core affect (Happy, excited, content)
 - External buffers
- Low well-being predicts depression (Gargiulo & Stokes, 2009) and suicide risk in autism (Hedley et al., in submission 2021)
- Relationships & sexuality are important for mental health and well-being



Interest in romance and sexuality

- Myth – ‘Some autistic people make occasional remarks about "having girl/boy friends," "getting married," "having babies," but they have no idea of what is really involved’ Elgar (1985)
- Autistic individuals (male & female) are interested in sexual relationships and romantic relationships (Byers et al. 2013; Dewinter et al., 2015; Mehzabin & Stokes, 2011)
- Dewinter et al. 2015
 - Sexual experience with another
 - 50 autistic boys, 90 N-Autistic; 15 to 18 years
 - Similar rates of sexual experiences, and same age for first event
 - May be biased by the Western European nature of the sample



Interest in romance and sexuality

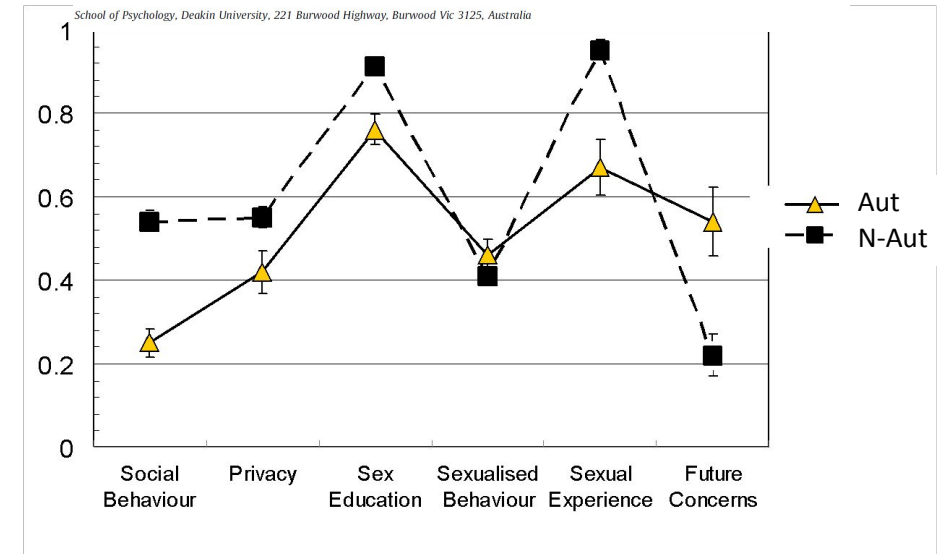
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- Mehzabin & Stokes (2011)
 - Young adults 18 to 30 years (M & F)
 - 46 N-ASD, 24 Autistic respondents
- No difference in self-reported desire, and little difference in self-reported exposure



Self-assessed sexuality in young adults with High-Functioning Autism

Prianka Mehzabin, Mark A. Stokes*

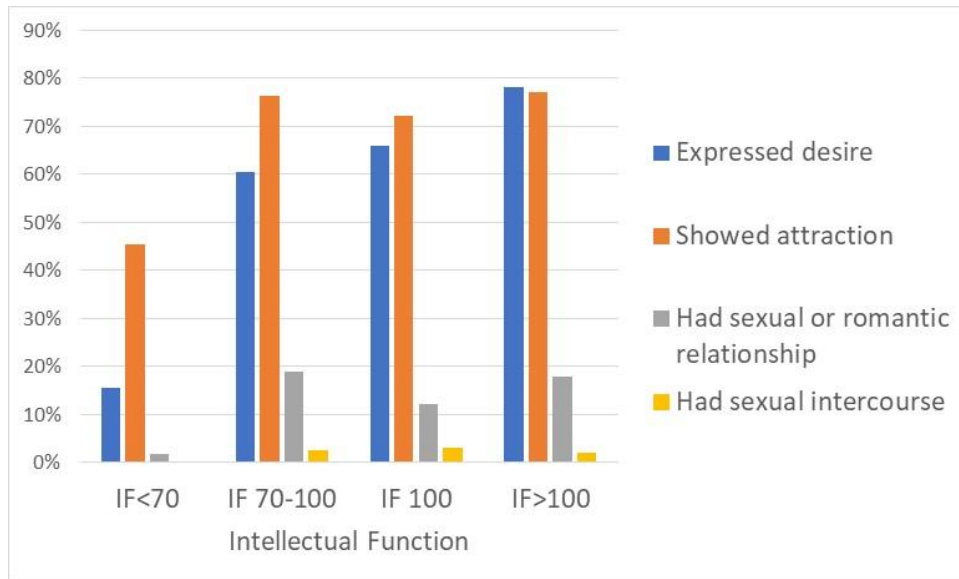
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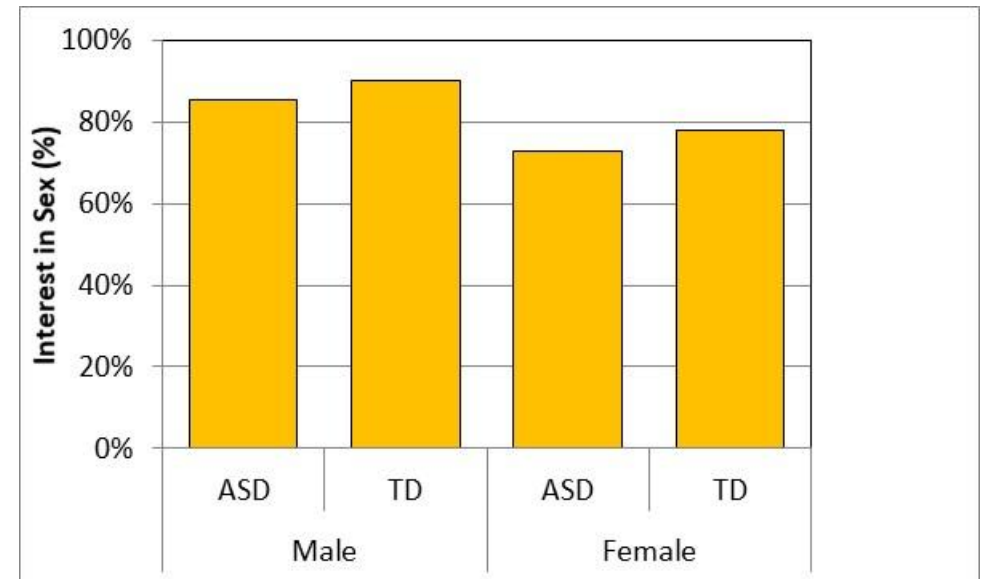


Interest in romance and sexuality

- Data suggest males more than females are interested in relationships and sex
 - Cheak-Zamora et al., 2019; Pecora et al., 2020
- Intellectual function influences expressed desire and attraction, but not relationship or sexual attainment
 - Cheak-Zamora et al., 2019



Pecora et al., 2020

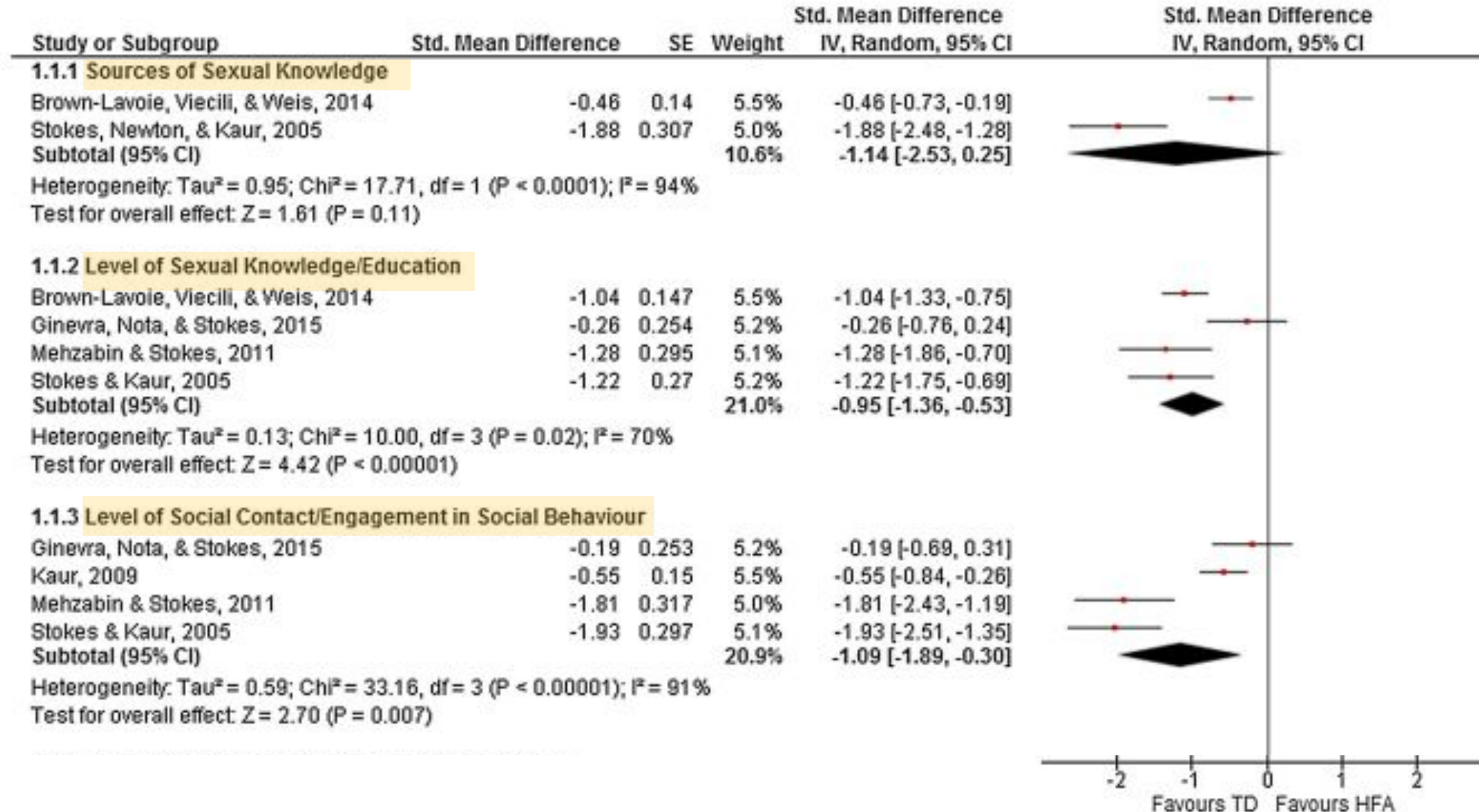


What are the sexual experiences of autistic individuals

- Pecora et al. 2017

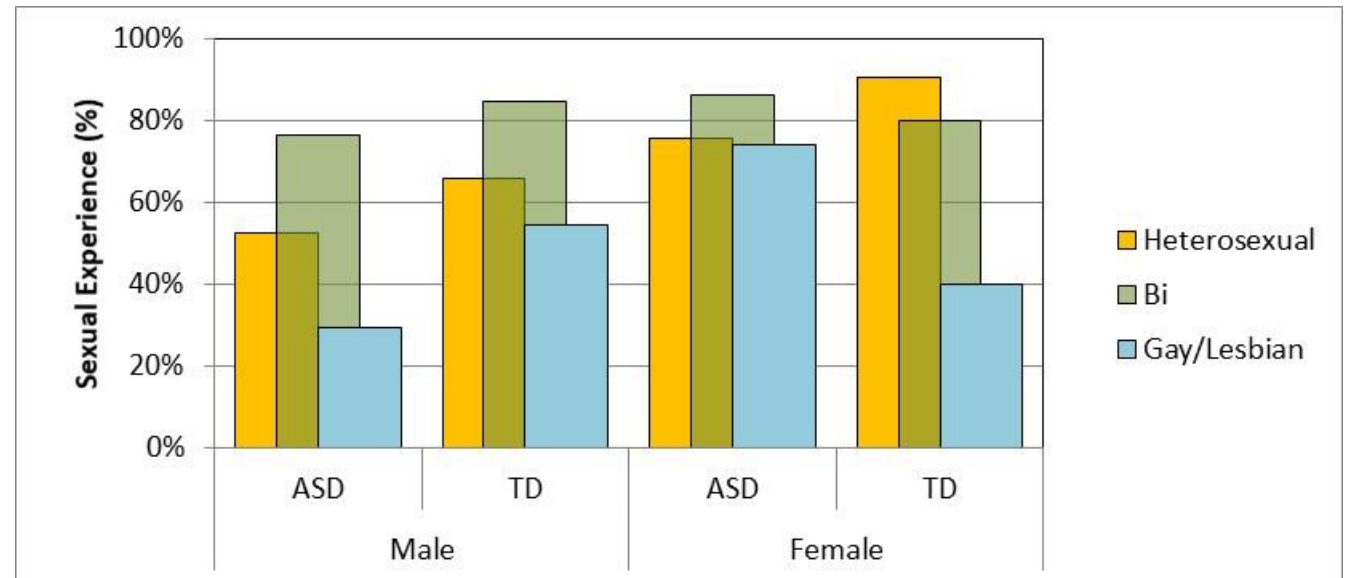


Biased toward
TD Autistic



Experience

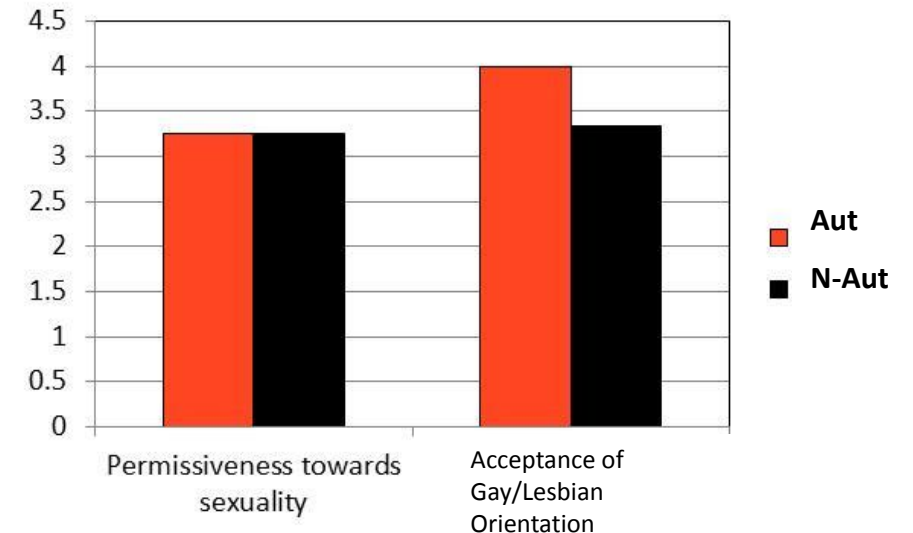
- Compared to autistic females, N-Aut males and females, autistic males had less sexual experience whether heterosexual, bi, or gay
 - Pecora et al., 2019



Is Sexual Orientation more variable in Autism?



- Dewinter et al. (2015)
 - Autistic & N-Aut have similar levels of permissiveness toward sexuality
 - Autistic individuals have higher acceptance of gay and lesbian orientations

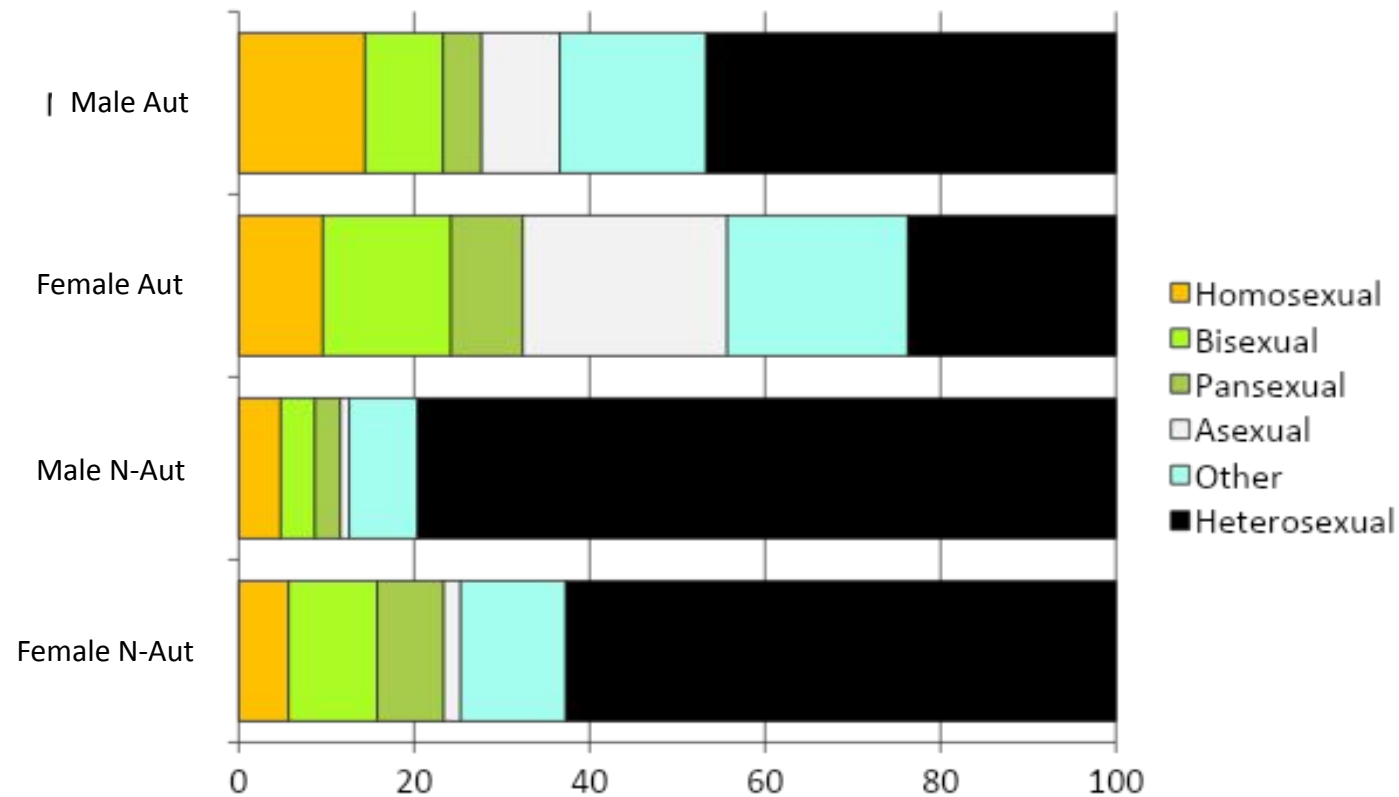


Sexual Orientation and Autism

Wider range of Sexual Orientations in the group with Autistic than N-Aut group

Females more diverse than males, $\chi^2_{(5)}=45.85, p<.001, \phi= 0.39$

(George & Stokes 2018a; 2018c)



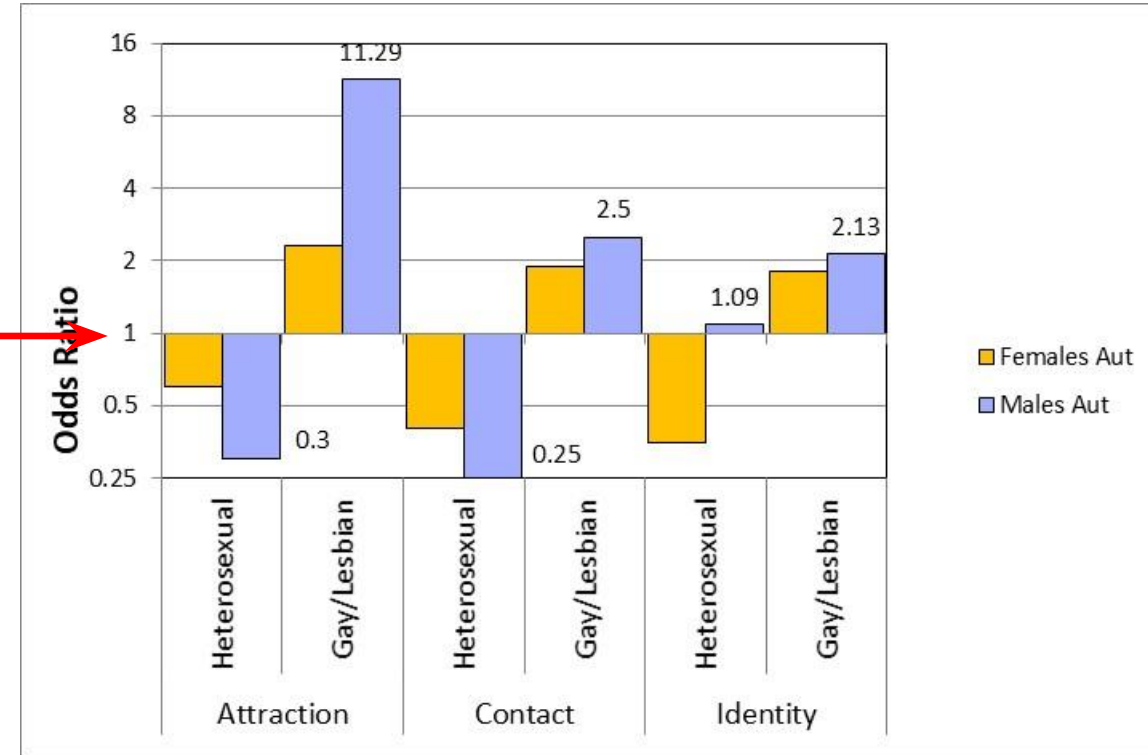
Sexual Attraction



Compared to N-Aut respondents

- Autistic males and females were MORE likely to endorse Gay or Lesbian attraction, contact, & identity
- Autistic males and females were LESS likely to endorse HETEROSEXUAL attraction & contact

Value reported by N-Aut respondents



Compared to autistic females

- Autistic males were more extreme in responses
 - (George & Stokes, 2018c)

Enablers and Barriers toward Intimacy

- Qualitative analysis of autistic (n=31) and non-autistic (n=26) individuals
- Enablers of intimacy for both groups included
 - communication, sharing and similarity, respect and safety for self and other, and working on the relationship.
- Barriers for both groups included:
 - intra- and interpersonal conflicts
- Autistic people specifically highlighted:
 - Uncertainty about relationships
 - Communication
 - Isolation and stigma
 - Sala et al. 2020

Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04377-8>

ORIGINAL PAPER



Romantic Intimacy in Autism: A Qualitative Analysis

Giorgia Sala¹ · Merrilyn Hooley¹ · Mark A. Stokes¹



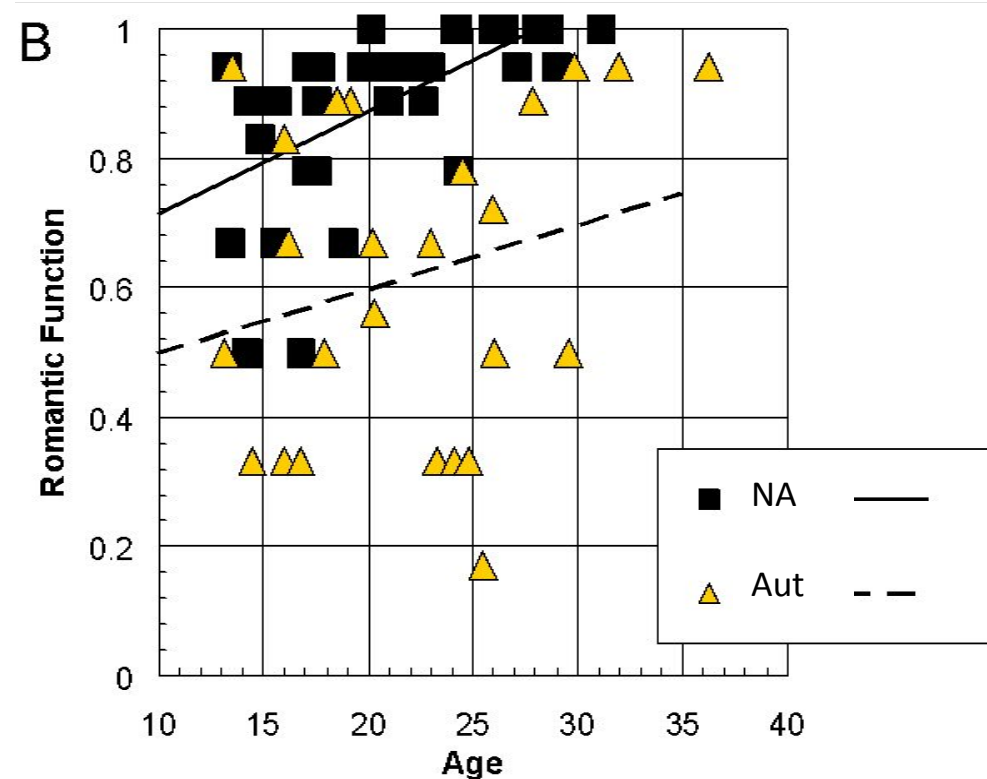
Word map of responses to “What is intimacy to you?”

Autistic Left, N-Aut Right

Sala et al. (2019)

Relationship Initiation: Skills

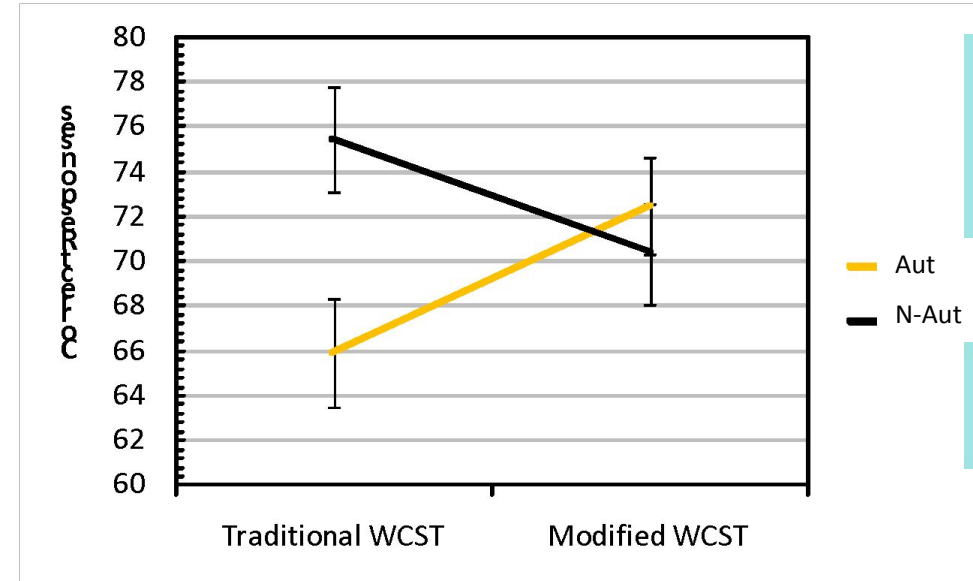
- Proxy survey of 25 Autistic, 38 non-autistic
 - Shows normal but reduced development over age
 - Aged 13 – 36
 - Stokes, Newton, & Kaur, 2007; Stokes & Kaur, 2005



Enablers and Barriers toward Intimacy

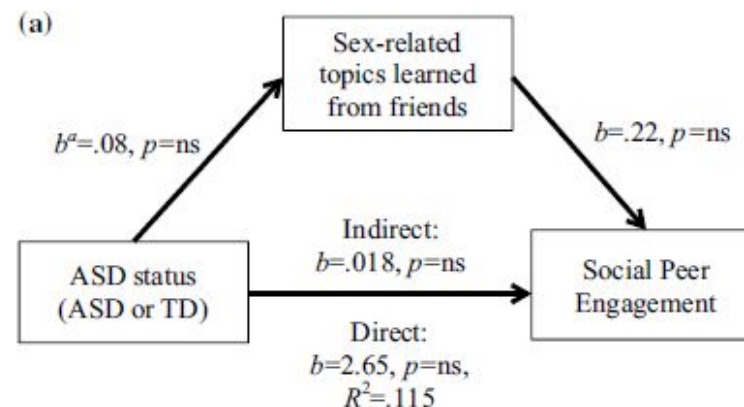
- Incorrect strategies

- Autistic (low needs) N=50, Non-autistic N=50
- Two groups: Traditional WCST; Modified WCST
 - Traditional WCST participants receive positive and negative feedback
 - Modified WCST participants receive only positive feedback
 - Broadbent & Stokes (2012)



- More information learned from the peer group leads to stronger social engagement more romantic relationship success

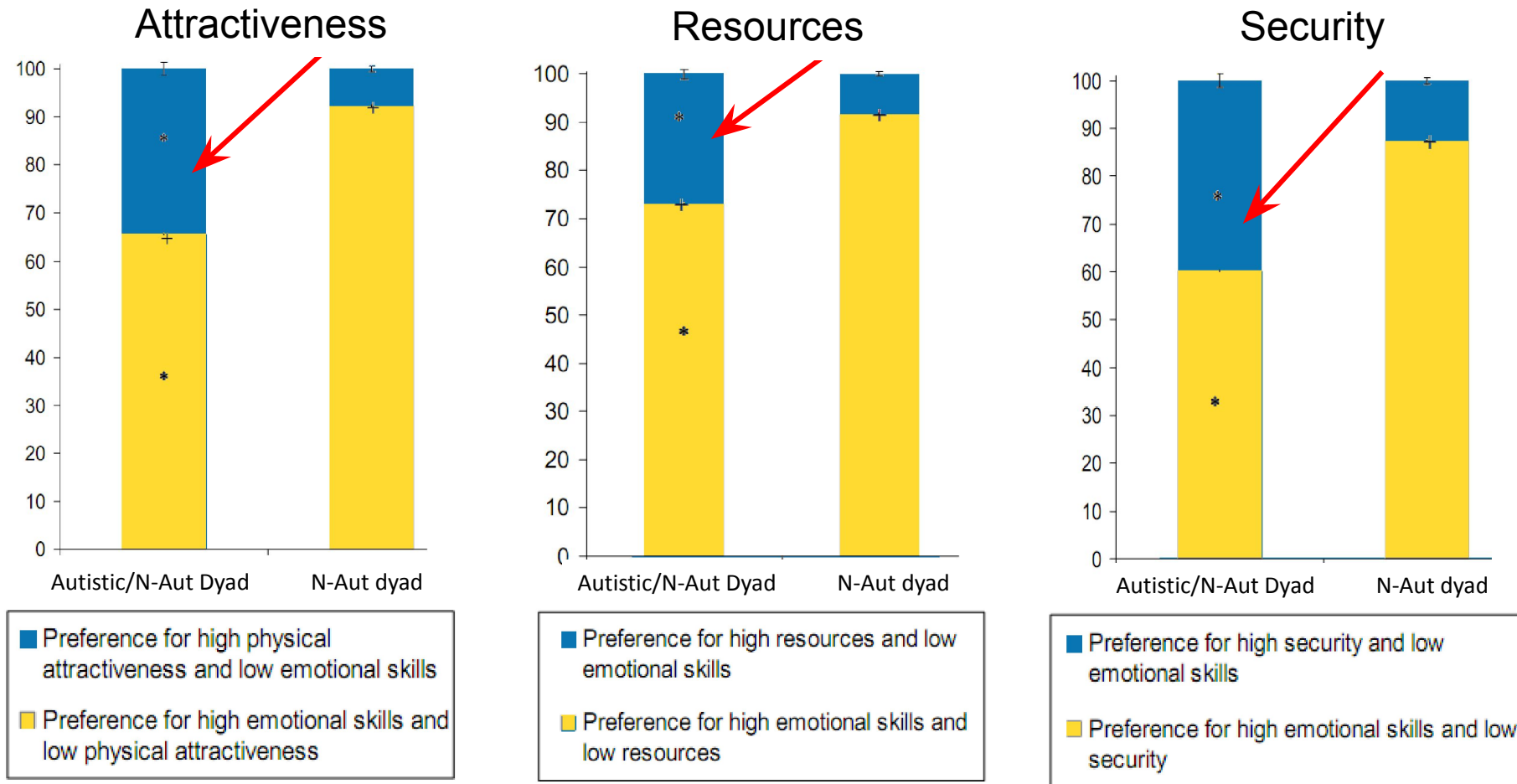
- 232 Autistic & 227 N-Aut participants
- SBS-III survey
 - Hancock et al., 2019





What do N-Aut partners trade off for their long term autistic partner?

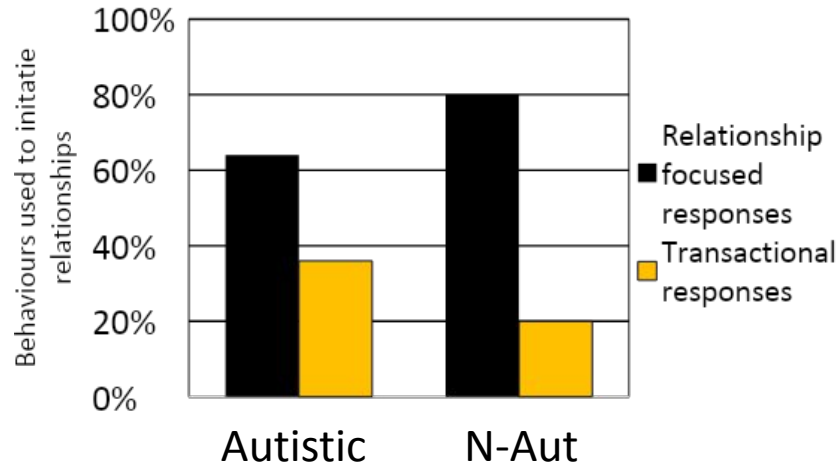
- 54 N-Aut dyads, 83 N-Aut partners in N-Aut/Autistic dyads, 18 Autistic dyads, 57 Autistic ASD partners in Autistic /N-Aut dyads
- Responses for N-Aut participant by partner:
 - Goldsworthy (2010)



Transactional Thinking (women's data)

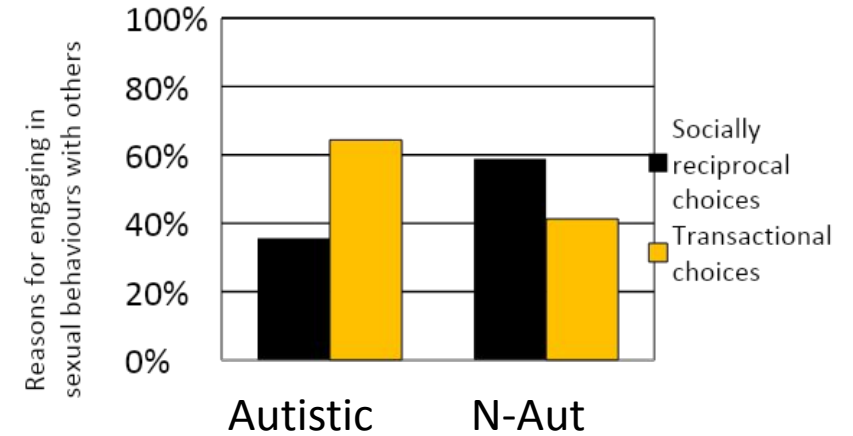


Behaviours Used to Initiate Relationships



- Autistic women were more 2 times more likely to endorse transactional responses when describing behaviours used to initiate relationships than N-Aut women ($OR= 1.96, p<.01$)

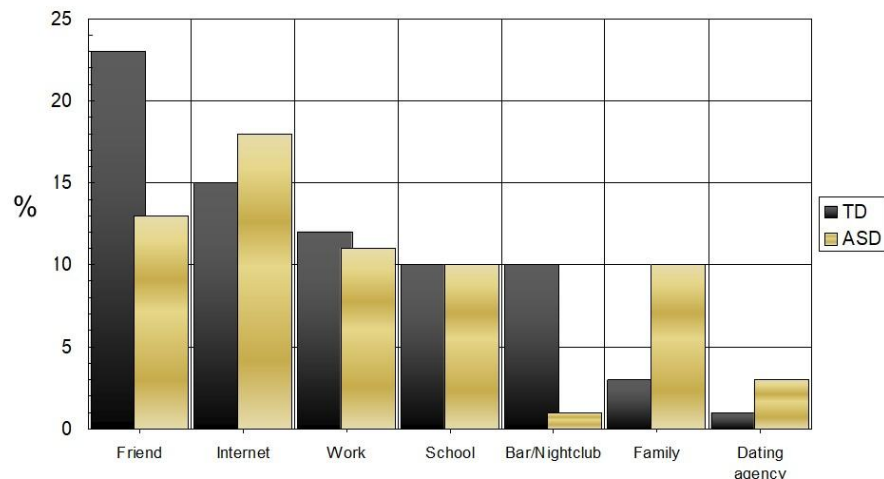
Motives for Engaging in Sexual Behaviours



- Autistic women were more 2.4 times more likely than N-Aut women to endorse transactional choices when engaging in sexual behaviours ($OR= 2.39, p<.001$)
- Pecora et al. 2018; Pecora, 2020

Enablers and Barriers toward Intimacy: Initial attraction & presentation

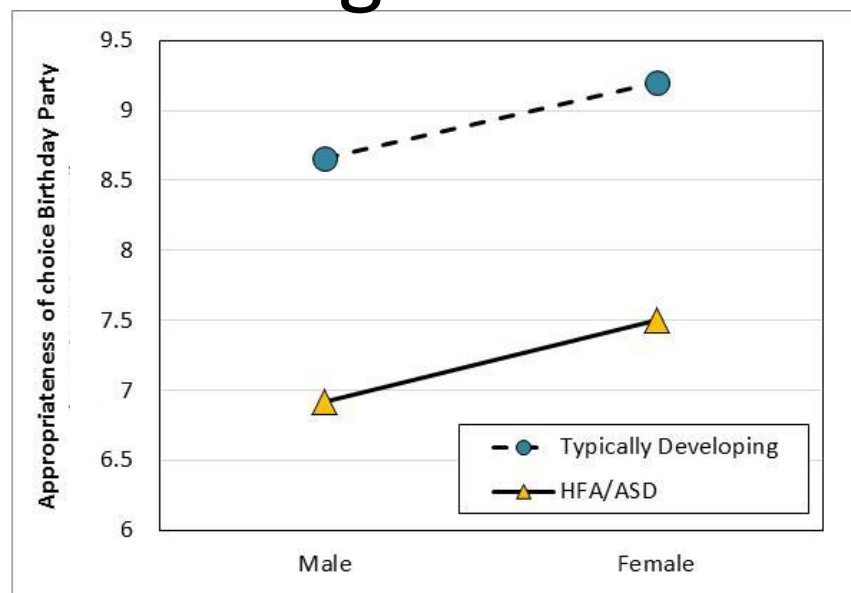
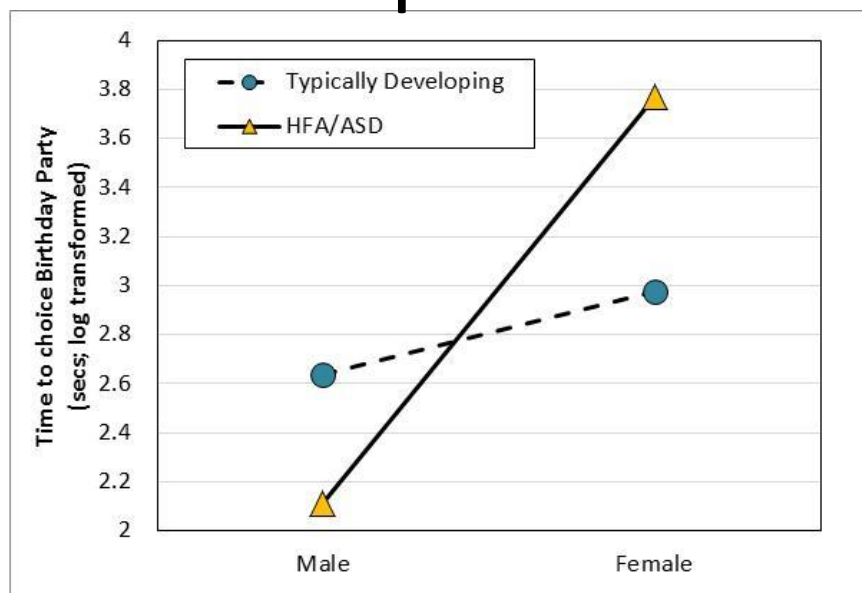
Choice of social connection



- Overly focused on internet & family as sources of relationships, reduced reliance upon friends and bars, etc.
 - 56% married, rest in long term relationships
 - 75 autistic and 137 N-Aut
 - Goldsworthy (2010)



Choice of presentation - clothing



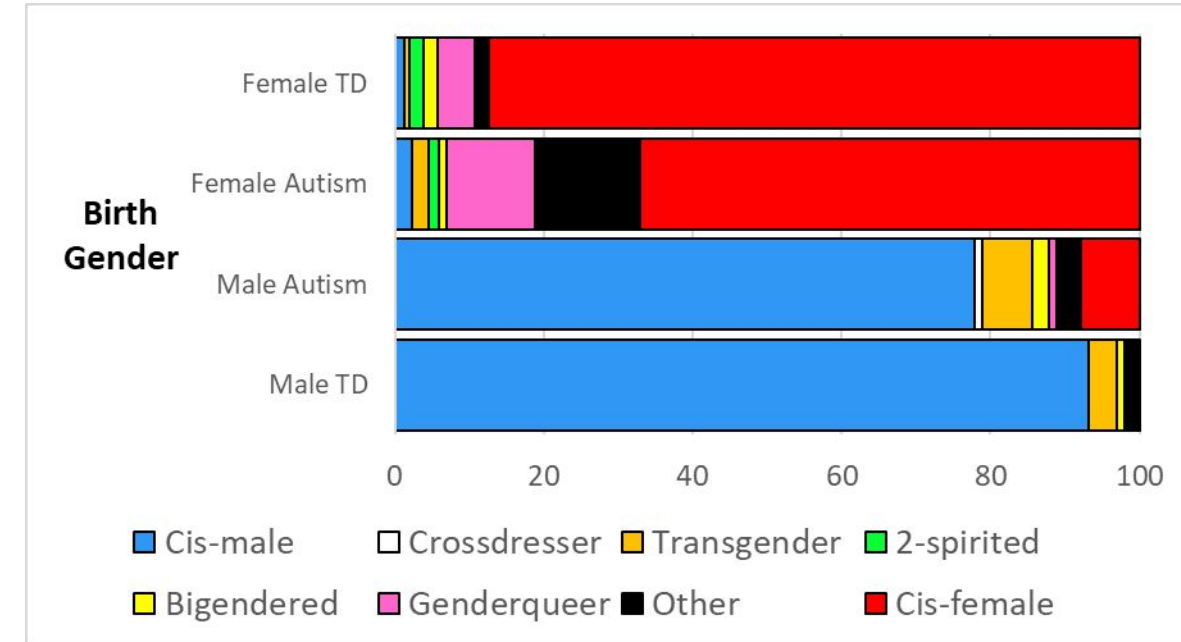
Dressing when going to a Birthday Party

- 50 Aut & 50 N-Aut 10 to 15 y/o
- Galic, 2014

Gender diversity

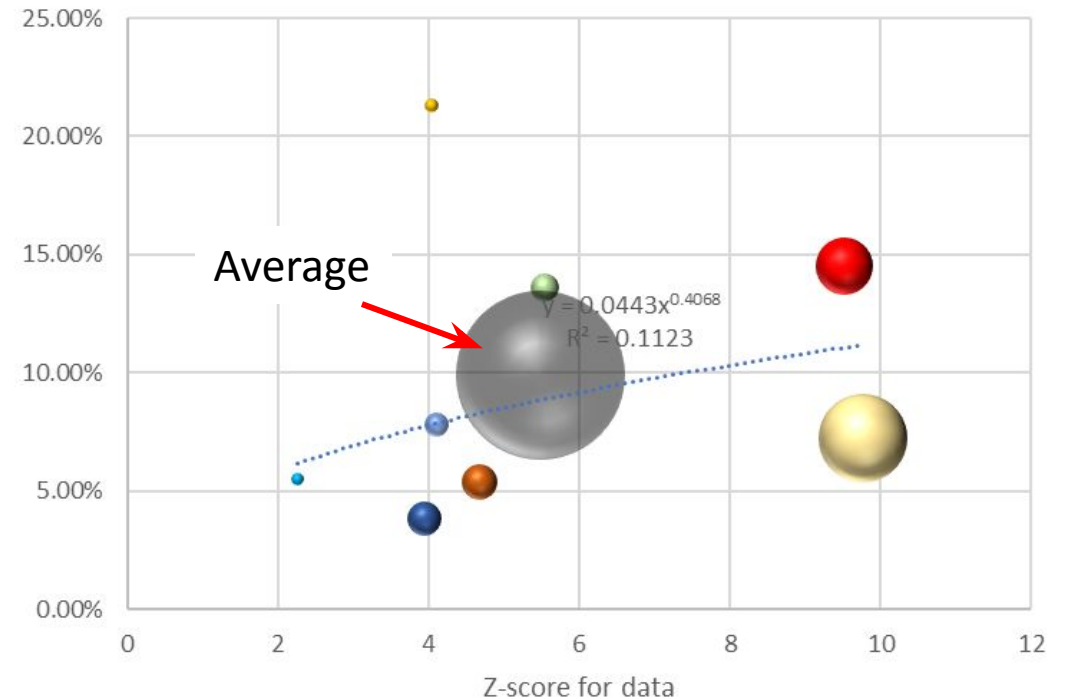


- What gender do you describe yourself as:
- Those with autism reported more gender non-conforming identities than N-Aut individuals
 - $\chi^2_{(1)} = 30.09, p < 0.001, \phi = .23$
 - (Male ASD 22.2%; Female ASD 33.9%)
 - George & Stokes 2018b



Is Gender more variable in autism?

- Meta-analysis suggests between 5 & 14% of autistic individuals express gender variance or dysphoria
 - van de Miesen et al., 2016, International Review of Psychiatry, 28, 70-80
- Average suggest at least 9.9% of those with autism also have some GD
 - 95% Confidence Interval 5.7 – 14.1%

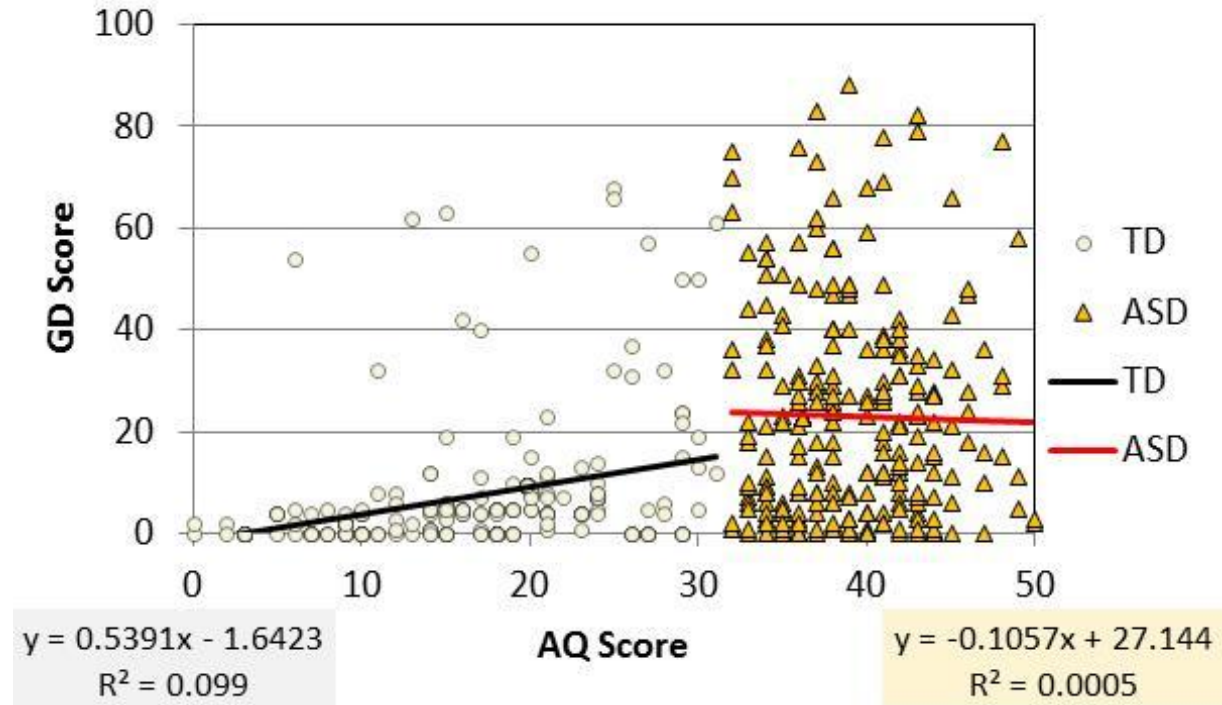


Bigger the ball, the more confident the estimate

Does Autism relate to GD



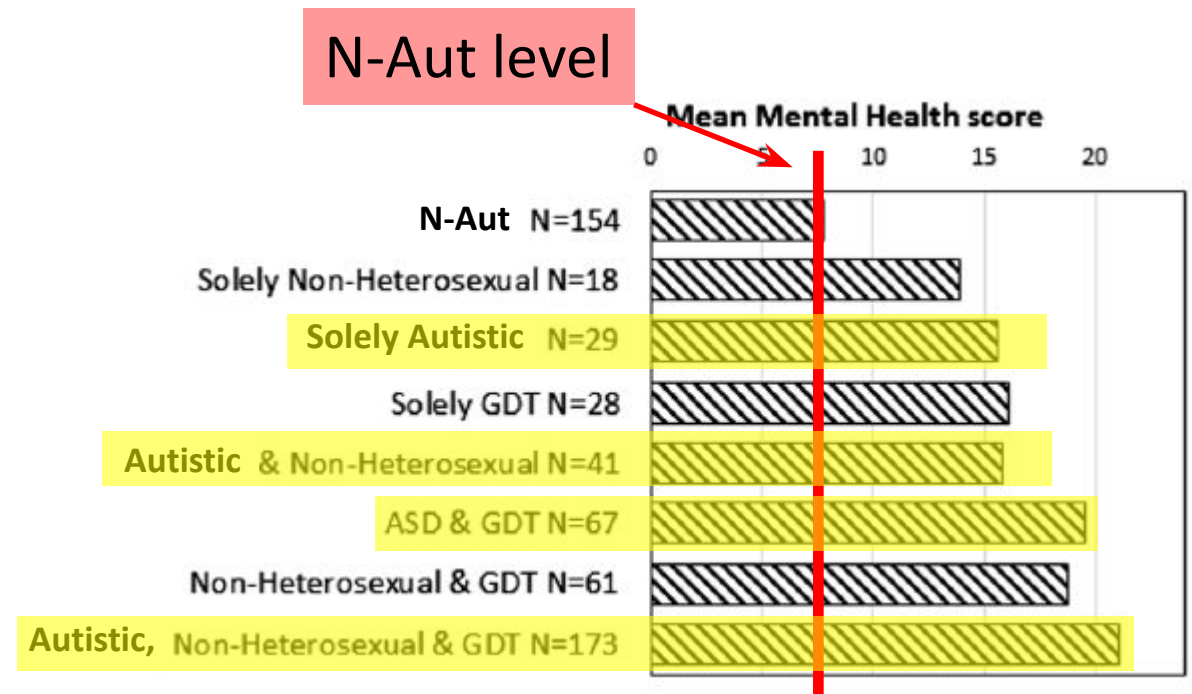
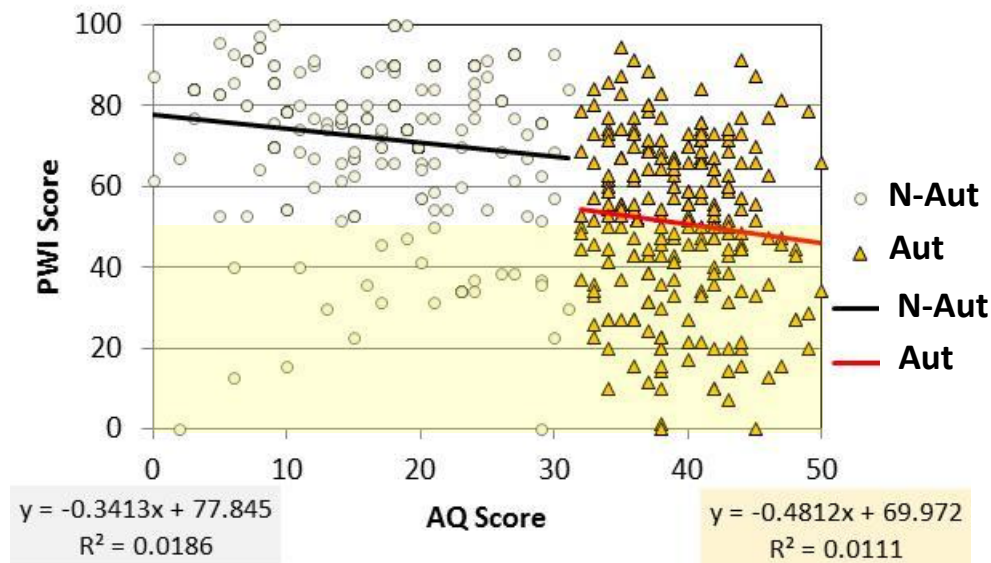
- N-Aut individuals had a relationship between GD scores and AQ scores
 - $r=.32, p<.001$
- Autistic Individuals had no relationship between GD scores and AQ scores
 - $r=-.022, p=.72$
- These two relationships were significantly different
 - $Z=3.73, p<.001$
- Autism symptoms DO NOT predict GD symptoms among those diagnosed with autism, but will in N-Aut populations



Mental Health & Well-being



- Autistic individuals more likely to have well-being below 50 (in yellow band)
 - 54% of those with autism & 21% of N-Aut had a failed well-being ($z=7.3, p<.001$)
 - As Autistic traits increased, well-being reduces
 - The more minorities an autistic individual sits within, the worse their mental health becomes
 - George & Stokes 2018c



Support

- At least two major support programs exist:
 - Tackling Teenage Training program (Greaves-Lord et al.)
 - PEERS (Program for the Evaluation and Enrichment of Relational Skills; Laugeson et al.)

Support



- Tackling Teenage Training program
 - Program consists of 18 weekly sessions focussing on a different theme with assignments for recipient to work on following the session
 - Topics inc: puberty, appearances, friendships, falling in love, sexuality
 - Focused on reducing problematic behavior & increasing social responsiveness
 - Large randomised control trial (95 participants in trial & 94 in control arm randomly assigned)
 - Dekker & Greaves-Lord et al., 2015; Visser & Greaves-Lord et al., 2015; 2017
 - Significantly improved psychosexual knowledge and social functioning

Support



- PEERS (Program for the Evaluation and Enrichment of Relational Skills)
 - Focused on improving social skills for teenagers and young adults
 - Program consists of 16 weekly sessions for parents and teenagers/young adults separately
 - Topics inc. conversational skills, choosing appropriate friends, appropriate use of humor, handling embarrassing feedback, changing a bad reputation, get-togethers; for young adults, dating etiquette is inc.
 - 2009 small RCT 17 autistic participants & 16 autistic control participants (13-17 years)
 - 2012a small RCT 14 autistic participants & 14 autistic control participants (13-17 years)
 - 2012b small RCT 9 autistic participants & 8 autistic control participants (18-23 years)
 - 2015 small RCT 12 autistic participants & 10 autistic control participants (18-24 years)
 - For teenagers, improved social skills and social contacts found. Among young adults, improvements in social skills, social contacts, empathy, and loneliness found.
 - Laugeson et al. 2009; 2012; 2015
 - Gantman et al., 2012
 - Several replication studies support these findings (e.g., Yoo et al., 2014; Schohl et al., 2014; McVey et al., 2016)
- Programs demonstrate that support may be offered and succeed

Summary



- Autistic Individuals
 - Have normal sexual desires
 - Show reduce levels of social insight
 - Show development in romantic skills with increasing age
 - Learn social function from peers and siblings
 - Learn romantic skills from social skills & parents
 - Have insight into their difficulties
 - Do obtain sexual contact, but at lower frequency

Summary

- Mental health of Autistic individuals is impacted adversely by poor relationship experience, societal demands, and exclusion of minorities
- Relationship support is needed around how to obtain, where to obtain, and what to do to obtain relationships
- Gender diversity impacts upon both these and amplifies the many difficulties for autistic individuals
- Support programs exist that have been assessed by RCT showing these achieve their aims

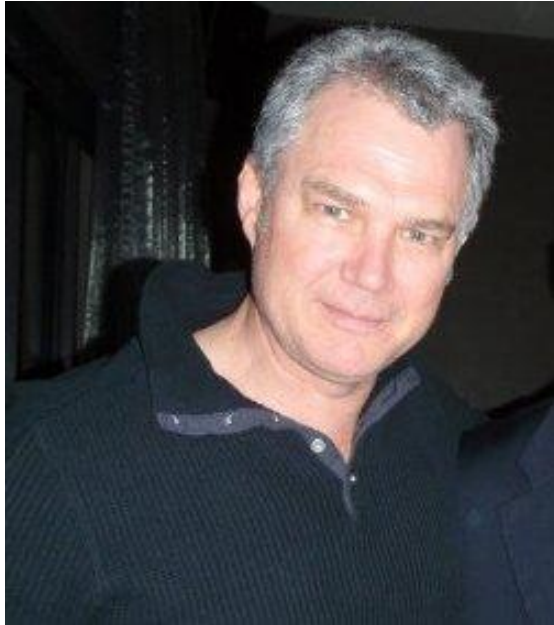
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Autism & Sexuality **Questions and Answers**



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Autism & Under-Resourced Communities: Opportunities for Change

Aubyn Stahmer & Vanessa Avila-Pons

Thursday, July 8th 2:00 pm EDT

Autism & Race: Engaging Racially and Ethnically Diverse Communities in Autism Research

Sarah Dababnah, Yetta Myrick, & Charina Reyes

Thursday, July 15th 10:00 am EDT

Central Elements between Intersectionality, Autism & Gender: The Research in 2021

Wenn Lawson & Jac Den Houting

Monday, July 19th, 6:00 PM EDT

Autism & Neurodiversity: Intersectionality and Social Justice

Steven Kapp & TC Waisman with Christina Nicolaidis

Thursday, July 22nd, 2:00 PM EDT