

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



Dr. Wenn B. Lawson & Dr. Jac den Houting
19th July 2021

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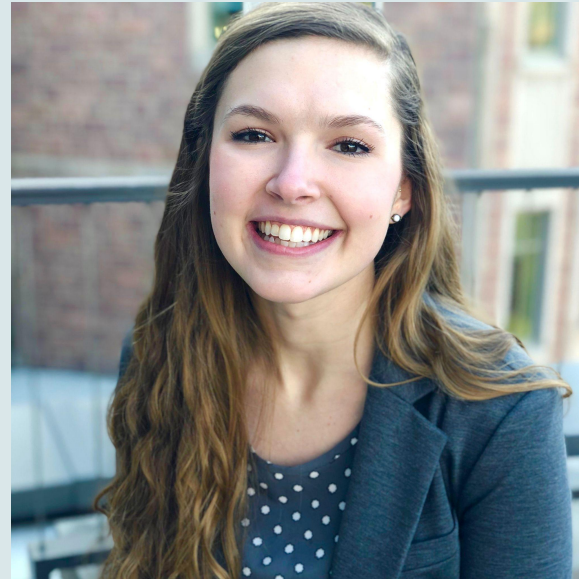


Central Elements between Intersectionality, Autism, & Gender: The Research in 2021 Working Group



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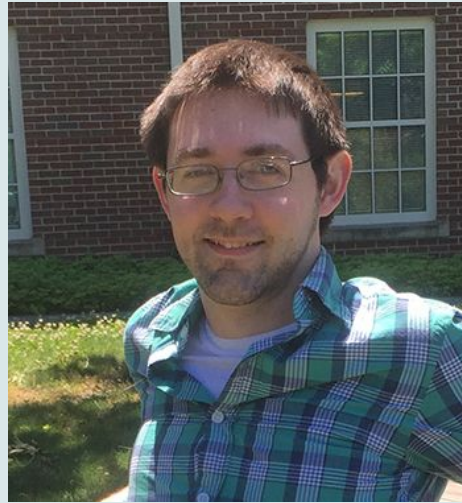


Central Elements between Intersectionality, Autism, & Gender: The Research in 2021 Working Group Continued



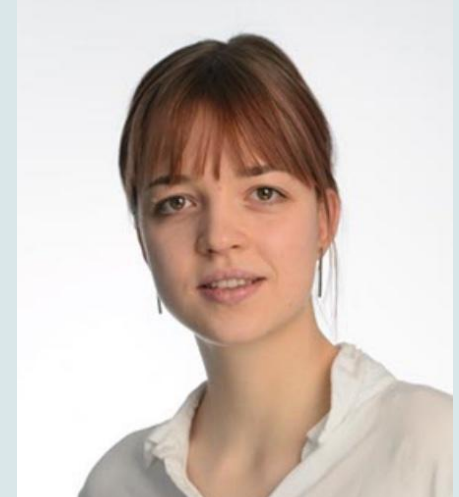
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Central Elements between Intersectionality, Autism, & Gender: The Research in 2021

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

Wenn Lawson & Jac den Houting



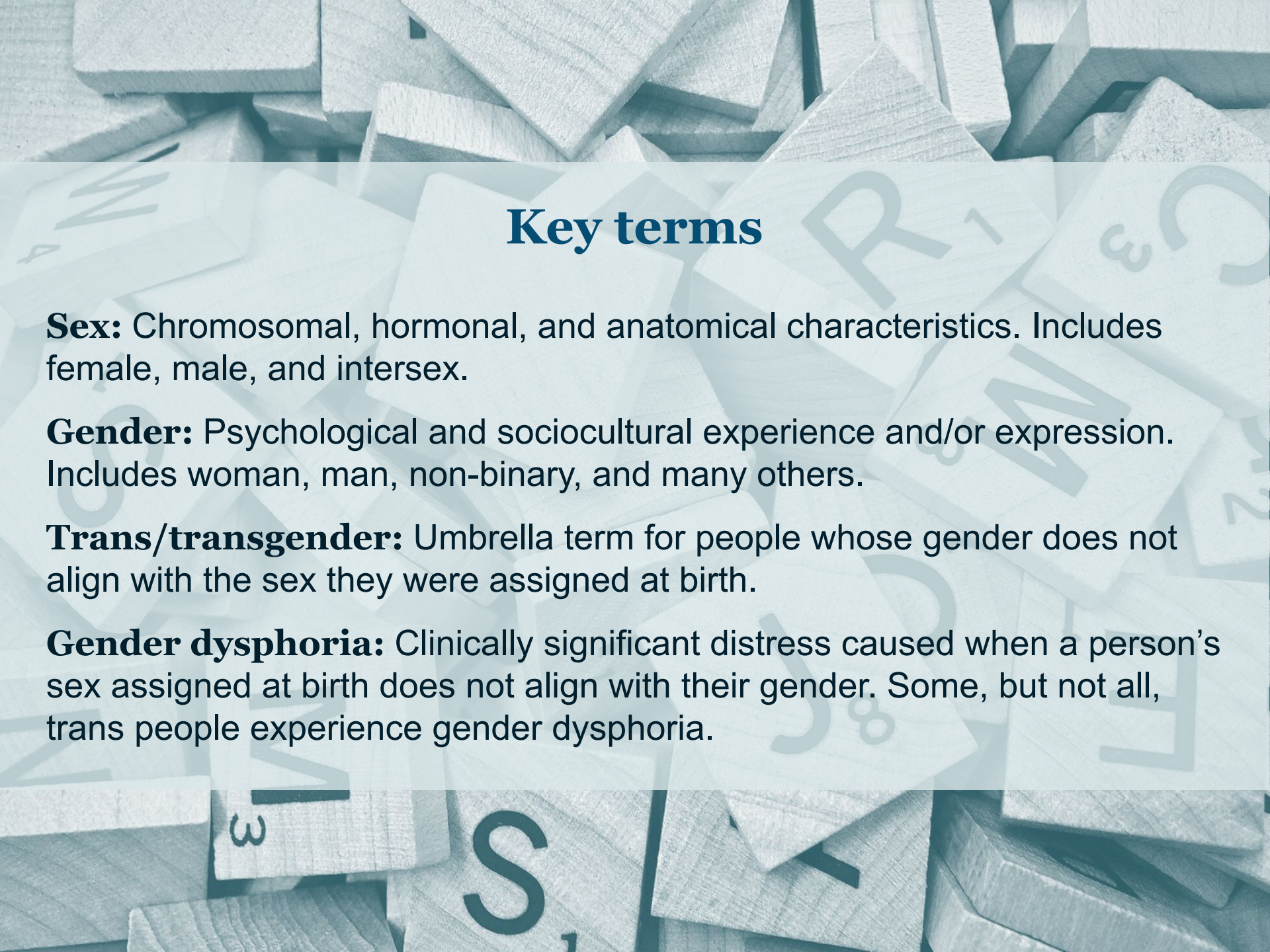


A group of people are gathered outdoors, likely at a protest or rally. In the foreground, a black dog is wearing a white tutu and a collar that says "TRAINING". A person wearing a hat and a jacket is looking down at the dog. In the background, several people are holding signs. One sign features a stick figure pointing to the word "Under". Another sign partially visible says "iversity".

Autism, gender, and intersectionality

This presentation lays a foundation for furthering conversation around central tenets coexisting between autism, gender & intersectionality.

The neurodiversity paradigm shift, encompassing all neurotypes as of equal benefit to society, has moved us along a trajectory doomed to conflict with an 'us & them' mindset.

The background of the slide is a collage of wooden blocks, some with letters and numbers. The top half of the slide is a solid light blue color. The bottom half is a collage of wooden blocks, some with letters and numbers. The text is overlaid on the blue background.

Key terms

Sex: Chromosomal, hormonal, and anatomical characteristics. Includes female, male, and intersex.

Gender: Psychological and sociocultural experience and/or expression. Includes woman, man, non-binary, and many others.

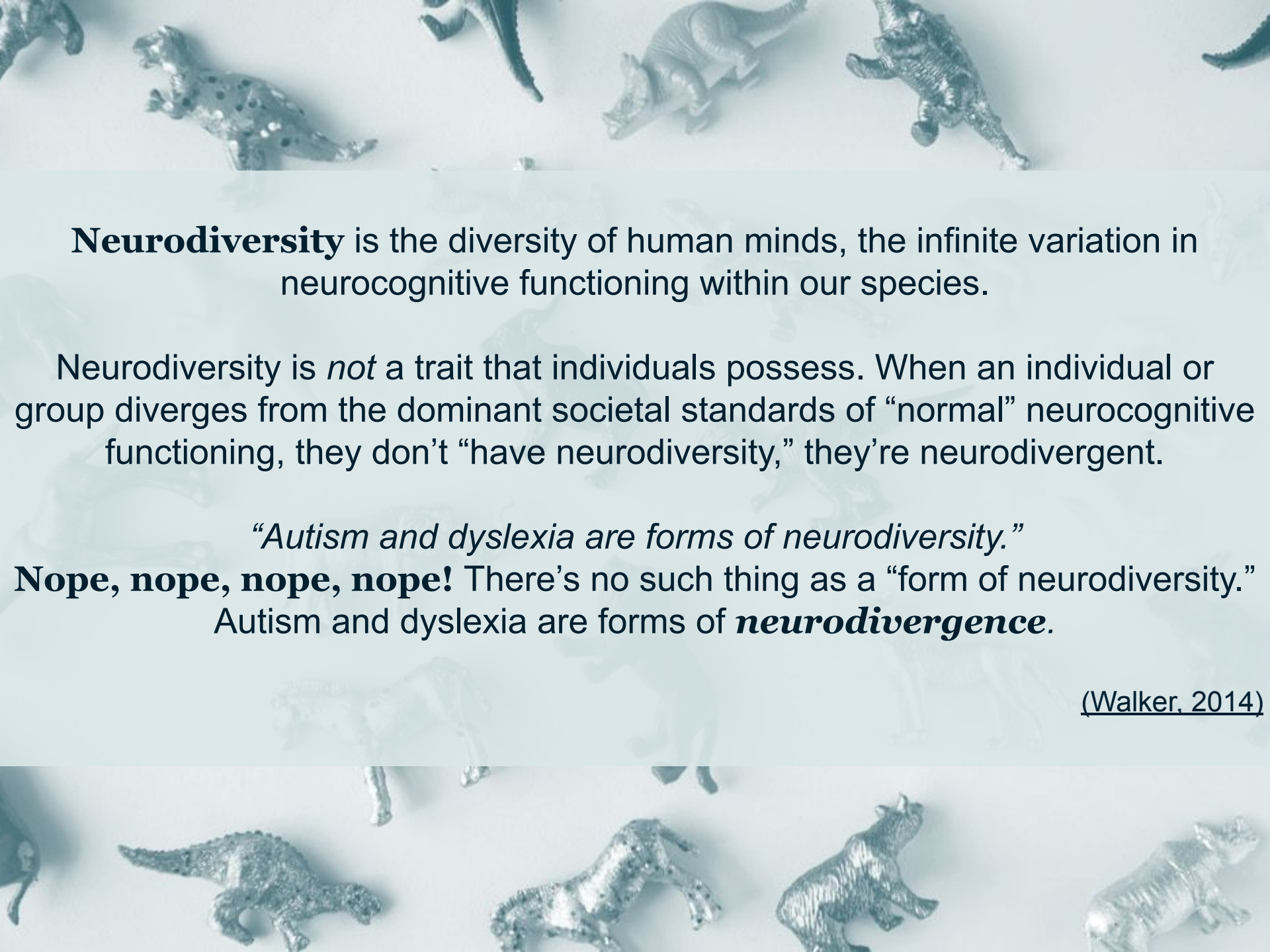
Trans/transgender: Umbrella term for people whose gender does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender dysphoria: Clinically significant distress caused when a person's sex assigned at birth does not align with their gender. Some, but not all, trans people experience gender dysphoria.

Autism criteria & impact upon intersectionality & gender

The diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) and the ICD-10 (WHO, 1994) state fixed and repetitive behaviours and subsequent social challenges are impacting autistic individuals. Intersectionality in autism has many faces, gender being one of them. **Autistic females, often late diagnosed, are challenged by so many ‘oppressive’ aspects of societal expectation.**

Intersectionality theory proposes an individual who has several oppressed identities will live completely different experiences than someone who shares only one, or some, of those oppressed identities ([Crenshaw, 1989](#)). **Intersection** with power & domestic violence; with being female; Black, a person of colour; being older or a child; coming from poverty; living with social or gender challenges; and so on.



Neurodiversity is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.

Neurodiversity is *not* a trait that individuals possess. When an individual or group diverges from the dominant societal standards of “normal” neurocognitive functioning, they don’t “have neurodiversity,” they’re neurodivergent.

“Autism and dyslexia are forms of neurodiversity.”

Nope, nope, nope, nope! There’s no such thing as a “form of neurodiversity.”
Autism and dyslexia are forms of ***neurodivergence***.

(Walker, 2014)

Respectful relationship depletes power



The intersectionality debate that highlights issues of powerlessness, pathology, providence, and other problems can cause despair.

But, research offers us hope that finding ways to knit the two could lead instead to fuller functioning, co-production, and the common good.

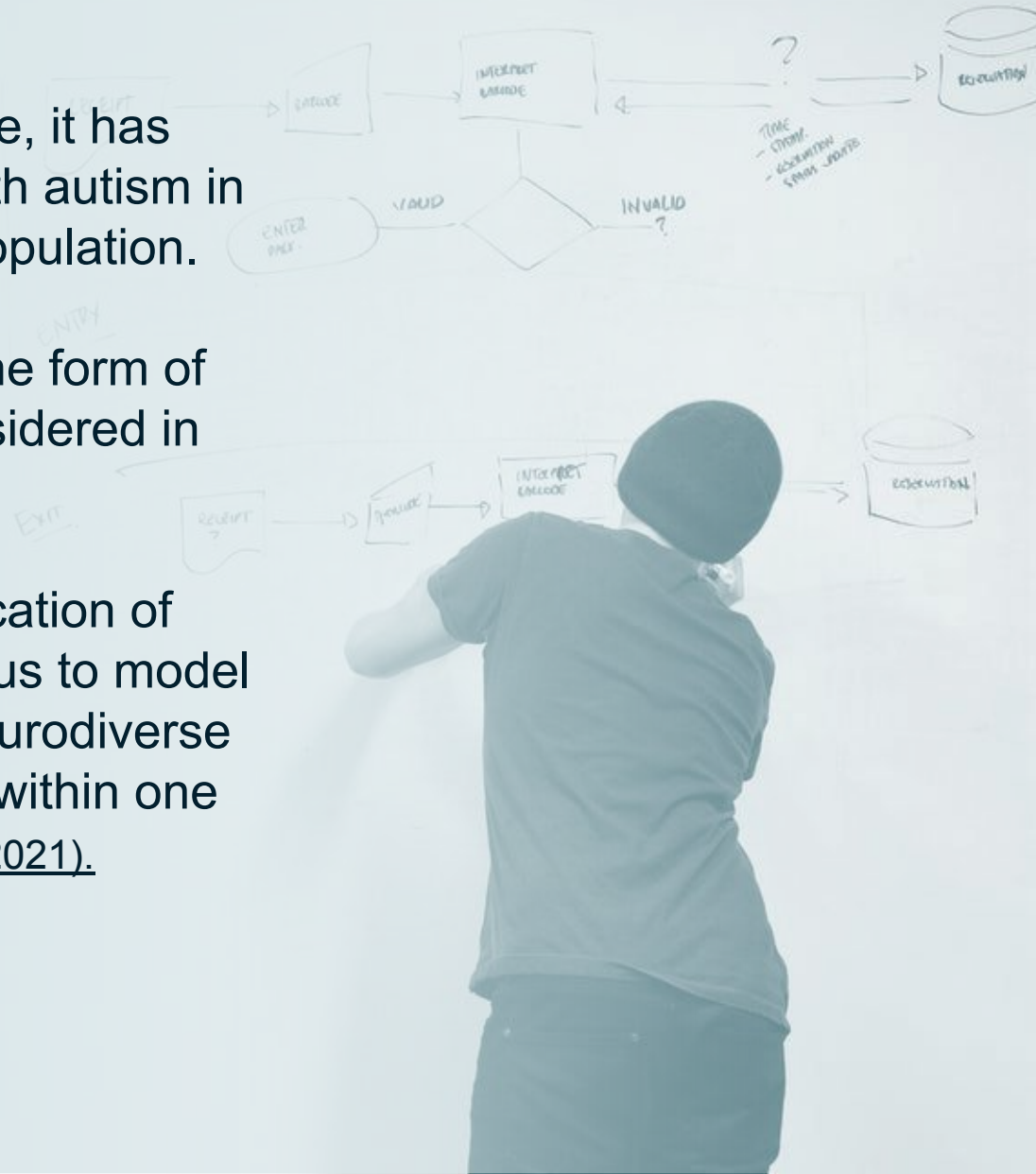
The psycho-social model (as demonstrated by the WHO's International Classification of Functioning) gives us a glimpse towards an open door shining a light on ways of harmonizing the two.

Co-occurring with autism

Autism rarely travels alone, it has cousins. ADHD co-occurs with autism in up to 75% of the autistic population.

Learning differences are one form of intersectionality rarely considered in research.

The International Classification of Functioning (ICF) may allow us to model opposing biomedical and neurodiverse views of autism and ADHD within one framework (Bolte et al., 2021).



Autism diagnosis

Although DSM 5 (APA, 2013) does not state that autistic people present differently depending on their sex assigned at birth (female or male), there is an increasing body of research suggesting that they do (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Hendrickx & Gould, 2015).

Some adults are diagnosed late in life (Pellicano et al., 2020).

Some are diagnosed after “treatment” for conditions they didn’t have.

Research shows high rates of depression in autistic and gender questioning people (Murphy et al., 2020).

Different from early on

Traditionally, many have understood gender as 'set', like physical aspects of appearance (eye colour).

However, stories from autistic people tell us otherwise.

Just like we grow and change over time, our connection to our gender identity will too.

(National Autistic Society, 2021)





Gender Dysphoria in Autism

Studies to date show that gender dysphoria is more common in the autistic community than in the non-autistic population.

(Heylens et al., 2018; Hisle-Gorman et al., 2019)

Therefore, we need to make sure that research regarding autism and gender listens to, and involves, autistic voices.



Different forever

Autism may be understood as a “gender defiant” condition: “Sexually dimorphic facial features vary according to level of autistic-like traits in the general population” (Gilani et al., 2015).

If this is so, it could add to social and gender dysphoria, because the non-autistic domain expect certain roles and features to be in evidence in certain populations.



More than
40%
of trans people attempt
suicide

(Toomey et al., 2018)

Neurodivergent and queer

In Australia, **one in eight** neurodivergent and LGBTQIA+ young people have attempted suicide in the past year. More than **one in three** have attempted suicide in their lifetime.

This rate is more than **twice** as high as non-disabled LGBTQIA+ young people, and **five times** as high as young people who are neither disabled nor LGBTQIA+.

(Rose & Heyworth, 2021; Hill et al., 2021)

TRANS 101

GENDER DIVERSITY DANCE COURSE

VIDEO FIVE: NEURODIVERSITY



Autism and connection

Due to being naturally more socially aware (having the XX chromosome, Arnold et al., 2016), social observational behaviour may be more available to people assigned female at birth.

Is this also apparent in trans autistics? In more feminine male autistics? Is it only the XX chromosome? (Szalavitz, 2016)





Adaptive Morphing

Keeping safe in a world that does not tolerate difference, if you are autistic and female, or poor, or Black, or gay, or trans, or lower in the pecking order, or do not come from privilege (and so on)...

Might mean that you disguise your autism, your gender, your sexuality (and so on; Lawson, 2020).

Connection



Self-discovery is a process.

Family, country, and culture, plus personality and learning style, are not a choice.

What we do with this, who we share ourselves with, are usually ours to decide.

But, this presumes a **connection** to self and to other.

Connection in autism isn't a given!



Who Am I?

The little girl dressed in pink,
A little boy in blue.
The object here is clear you see,
They offer the gender clue.
The picture of what's right.
The picture of what's wrong.
We see it everyday, we see it
every way.
We hear it in a song.



But whose song do we sing?
Who do we represent?
All of humanity or just the ones we
get?
What's the guiding rule here?
What's the thing to do?
The rule is: It's different, it's
different for me and it's different
for you.

(Lawson, 2021)

Getting lost in the detail

Discovering **who I am**, not **what I can do**,
can take autistics longer.

My autism helps me focus upon things that
interest me, such as researching, writing and
poetry.

But, it also meant I often couldn't connect to
the wider picture of 'self' and of 'other.'

Getting married - 2007





Trans?

After 62 years and lots of life happenings (death of one of my sons; moving house several times; returning to study and getting a PhD; being prominent in ex-Gay leadership - my apology is online [[Lawson, 2007](#)] - and church, then being asked to leave due to owning my love of a woman), I began to recognise that I was trans.

Concepts of normality

Human beings feel safe in what they experience as familiar. This, mistakenly, becomes what is '**normal**'. Normal for you may not be normal for me. So, this is a problematic term.

I now know my 'norm' is in being male, so I took steps to conform my body to that norm. For others, it might be usual for them to be non-binary, gender non-conforming, or at home with their cis-gender. All are absolutely fine... but can take a while to process.

(Kourti & McLeod, 2019; Lawson, 2008; Pearson & Rose, 2021; van Schalkwyk, 2018)



Making research accessible

Easy Read and accessible information for people with intellectual disabilities: Is it worth it? (Chinn & Homeyard, 2016)

- Photovoice
- Flexible communication
- Visual preferences
- Participatory methods

Other intersections?

We need to create resources that are accessible (including Easy Read), otherwise we do not address transections of education, learning style, power dynamics, language issues, disability issues, etc.

Being autistic and blind, being autistic and deaf, being autistic and needing sensory supports, being autistic and needing access to appropriate curriculum, and so on.





Participatory research and co-production

Participatory research aims for total community involvement in all aspects of research:

- Production of ideas
- Research design
- Method development
- Data collection
- Analysis
- Translation of findings

This is just one of the ways that we can equalize power in research.



Equity

Focusing on autistic people's quality of life, uniting gender under the equity banner, remitting gender dysphoria and building mental fitness in the autistic and autism communities create an intersection, not as a crossroad of indecision but more a roundabout that exits each in the direction of prosperity.

Resources

Ekins, E. (2021). *Queerly autistic: The ultimate guide for LGBTQIA+ teens on the spectrum*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London

Lawson, W. (2017). Women and girls on the autism spectrum: A profile. *Journal of Intellectual Disability: Diagnosis and Treatment*, 5(3), 90-95.

Lawson, W., & Lawson, B. (2017). *Transitioning together: One couple's journey of gender and identity discovery*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London

Mendes, E., & Maroney, M. (2019). *Gender identity, sexuality and autism: Voices from across the spectrum*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London

Purkis, Y., & Lawson, W. (2021). *The autistic trans guide to life*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London

Symington, S. (2021). *Coming out again: Transition stories*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London



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Questions and Answers



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INSAR INSTITUTE 2021
AUTISM & INTERSECTIONALITY
JUNE 17 - JULY 21, 2021



Please join us for our final installment of the 2021 INSAR Institute:
Autism & Neurodiversity: Intersectionality and Social Justice

Steven Kapp & TC Waisman with Christina Nicolaidis
Thursday, July 22nd, 2:00 PM

Coming Soon: INSAR STC Anti-racism Resources Repository
Email StudentCommittee@autism-insar.org for more information

