Autism Entangled – Controversies over Disability, Sexuality, and Gender in Contemporary Culture

Toby Atkinson BA, MA

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Sociology Department, Lancaster University

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. Furthermore, I declare that the word count of this thesis, 76940 words, does not exceed the permitted maximum.

Toby Atkinson

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Contents

Abstract

Public visibility of autistic people has increased significantly since the early 1990s. Diagnosis rates of autism have risen in Western countries, whilst cultural representations of autistic people have proliferated across various forms of media. This period has also seen the emergence of the neurodiversity movement which views autism in terms of difference rather than defects and politically organises to challenge disablist oppression.

This thesis explores the ways in which autistic people have been represented as sexual and gendered subjects in the United Kingdom from the early 1990s to the present day and analyses the implications of such representations for autistic people's lives. It considers how influential representations of autistic people, for example, pop cultural portrayals of autistic people as male geeks, have been challenged by autistic self-advocates who argue that such framings fail to recognise autistic people's diverse experiences.

Over the course of this thesis, I combine critical theoretical work from across the humanities and social sciences with empirical analysis of a selection of texts in order to develop a multifaceted account of how autistic people are represented as gendered and sexual subjects in the contemporary moment. I analyse a range of texts exploring autistic people's experiences of gender and sexuality, with my sample including self-help books, academic publications, television shows, and autistic self-advocacy writing. Drawing upon theoretical work from neurodiversity studies, disability studies, feminist theory, and queer theory I intervene in ongoing debates and controversies surrounding representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects, for example, the moral panic over the public visibility of young autistic gender variant people. I demonstrate the complex ways in which framings of autistic experience produced within scientific research inform popular media texts, as pathologising, essentialist, and infantilising medical and psychological terms are troubled and reproduced by such texts. I show how texts produced by autistic people challenge biomedical and psychological framings, offering more inclusive representations which recognise autistic

people’s gender and sexual diversity. These texts highlight the role of social factors in shaping autistic people’s lives and provide platforms for the perspectives of autistic women, gender variant people, and LGBTQ people. I argue that these works can inform future academic research within the social sciences and humanities, offering more sociological and critical accounts of autistic people’s experiences, and can encourage alternative representations of autistic people in popular culture.

Writing as an autistic scholar concerned with issues of disability, gender, and sexuality, the thesis synthesises existing theoretical and original empirical work in order to develop a sociological analysis of biomedical, psychological, and cultural representations which affect autistic people’s lives. In this way, the thesis contributes to the growing field of neurodiversity scholarship within academic research.

PART ONE:

CONTEXT AND ANALYSIS

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introductory Remarks

This thesis critically explores some of the key ways in which autistic people are represented as gendered and sexual subjects in the context of the contemporary United Kingdom (UK), engaging with various debates and controversies surrounding such representations in the process. In this introductory chapter, I provide an overview of what constitutes autism according to established biomedical and psychological accounts, before introducing alternative framings which are more sociological in nature. In turn, I describe the emergence of perspectives associated with the neurodiversity movement and detail how such theoretical work informs the thesis. The chapter continues with a discussion of my methodological approach, namely a textual analysis of a sample of key texts from diverse domains focused on autism, gender, and sexuality. I conclude with an outline of the remaining eight chapters of the thesis in which I detail the focus of each chapter.

Autism

Over the course of recent decades, autism has received greater attention in many countries and many domains. There has been an increase in the numbers of people diagnosed with autism and an increase in the amount and variety of representations of autistic people in popular culture. Competing forms of advocacy have emerged alongside policy debates and legislative measures. Autistic people have become more visible in the public sphere, not only as subjects of analysis and categorisation, but as participants and agents involved in enacting social change. As Gil Eyal et al. (2010) put it in their study of the rising rates of diagnoses of autism, “Autism has become highly visible. Once you begin to look for it, you see it everywhere” (p1).

What is being talked about when the term ‘autism’ is invoked in popular discourses? In some instances, autism is a medical label, a diagnostic category deployed by health professionals, parents, and carers to refer to a condition that affects the development of individuals. In other contexts, autism is pejoratively used to target individuals and groups. In yet other instances, autism is an affirmative term used to describe one's own identity.

Autism generates panic for some people, with popular rhetoric depicting autism as an epidemic with damaging consequences for children (Eyal et al., 2010; McGuire, 2016). On the other hand, some individuals have positively re-claimed their autistic identity and have politically mobilised around autism (Walker, 2014). In summary, autism is a contested and highly politicised term, with ongoing debates and controversies regarding autism having implications for the lives of individuals and the state of societies.

Criteria for a diagnosis of autism can be found within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). Such guides are designed to provide medical professionals with a means of identifying diseases and disorders in patients, describing the symptoms of specific conditions so that the causes can be labelled and attended to. Published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), DSM-5 is the most recently compiled edition of the DSM. Within the manual's section on "Neurodevelopmental Disorders" (2013, p31), the latest diagnostic criteria for "Autism Spectrum Disorder" (p50) is provided. The criteria gives an overview of the characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and its subsections, enabling it to be identified in individuals by medical professionals. According to DSM-5, ASD is fundamentally composed of:

> Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, including deficits in social reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction, and skills in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships. In addition to the social communication deficits, the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder requires the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities.
>
> (p31)

The International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision (ICD-11) produced by the World Health Organisation (WHO) provides a similar description of ASD in its section on neurodevelopmental disorders. According to ICD-11:

> Autism spectrum disorder is characterised by persistent deficits in the ability to initiate and to sustain reciprocal social interaction and social communication, and by a range of restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour and interests. The onset of the disorder occurs during the developmental period, typically in early childhood, but symptoms may not become fully manifest until later, when social demands exceed limited capacities. Deficits are sufficiently severe to cause impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning and are usually a pervasive feature of the individual's functioning observable in all settings, although they may vary according to social, educational, or other context. Individuals along the spectrum exhibit a full range of intellectual functioning and language abilities.
>
> (2019, para1)

Under current diagnostic criteria, autism is understood as a neurodevelopmental condition composed of a set of deficits. Autism, according to these accounts, is generally marked by deficits in forms of interaction and communication and by repetitive and obsessional behaviours. As the use of the diagnostic framework of 'a spectrum' suggests, the range and severity of the deficits, alongside the impacts that they have, are perceived as varying from individual to individual.

Despite the classifications in the DCM and the ICD of autism as a biological neurodevelopmental disorder, the definitive causes of autism remain unknown. As Des Fitzgerald puts it in his study of autism research, "despite many years of research, we still have no firm, coherent marker of autism, at either the neurobiological or genetic levels" (2017, p3). Scientific researchers generate different theories which circulate throughout the wider public sphere. Psychological accounts attempt to determine the causes of deficits, whilst genetic studies attempt to understand how autistic traits are transmitted intergenerationally. At the same time, narratives which ascribe the rise in autism diagnoses to factors such as food contamination and unsafe vaccines have emerged and shaped popular discourses (Hacking, 2006).

As Fitzgerald states:

> It remains striking that even as autism has emerged as a focus of popular concern, and even as it is located within both the bodies and habits of an ever-larger number of people, it has continued to resist any sort of easy clinical or biological definition.
>
> (2017, p8).

In summary, despite considerable study there remain no definitive answers as to the causes of autism.

Historical and Sociological Study

Over the last fifteen years, various journalistic and scholarly accounts have been produced detailing the history of autism as a diagnostic category and the debates and controversies surrounding it (Nadesan, 2005; Waltz, 2013; Silberman, 2015; Donvan and Zucker, 2016; McGuire, 2016; Evans, 2017). Such historical accounts have tended to focus on autism's development and reception as a category within the context of Anglosphere nation states, primarily the UK and USA, from the early 20th century to the present day. The more sociological accounts of these historical events, which include texts written by Nadesan, Waltz, and Evans, draw attention to the role played by social factors in shaping understandings of those diagnosed as autistic. In this way, such authors highlight the importance of social contexts which affect autistic people's lives. In doing so, they challenge accounts which simply focus on autism as a biological phenomenon.

Sociological accounts of this nature contribute to conversations within the social sciences and humanities which pay critical attention to autism as an object of inquiry. Works such as *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (2008) by Stuart Murray and *Re-Thinking Autism: Diagnosis, Identity and Equality* (2016) edited by Katherine Runswick-Cole, Rebecca Mallett, and Sami Timimi offer notable examples of works which explore autism as a sociological and cultural phenomenon. These texts critique the production of autism as a purely biomedical label and challenge dominant cultural representations of autistic people, for example, depictions of autistic people as socially impaired "idiots and savants" (Murray, 2008, p23) in popular fiction.

Parallel to the development of this work within the humanities and social sciences, recent decades have witnessed the emergence of the neurodiversity movement (Silberman, 2015; Evans, 2017). Since the 1990s, autistic people's own political activities and theoretical work have gained greater public visibility. Autistic people have struggled against forms of inequality and oppression present in many societies, such as inadequate and abusive medical and welfare service provision, or incidents of intimate violence against autistic people within families (McGuire, 2016).

At the same time, autistic people have challenged popular and influential frameworks for understanding autism, ones which have predominantly been proposed by non-autistic experts. For autistic self-advocates who associate with the neurodiversity movement, such frameworks inadequately reflect the realities of autistic experience, often pathologising what it means to be autistic. Instead of viewing autism as a disorder characterised by inherent deficits, as in the criteria of the DSM and ICD described earlier, autistic neurodiversity activists and theorists such as Milton (2012a, 2012b, 2018), Sinclair (2012), Walker (2013, 2014, 2015), and Yergeau (2013, 2018) propose alternative frameworks for understanding autism. Autism, these thinkers argue, should be de-pathologised and understood as a legitimate aspect of people's experiences. In opposition to purely medical and psychological accounts focused on biological factors, neurodiversity thinkers highlight the role of social norms and institutions in shaping the experiences of autistic individuals. Milton (2012a), for example, suggests that autistic people's impairments need to be situated within social contexts. In his view, autistic people struggle to communicate and participate in environments determined by non-autistic people. As a result, autistic impairments are not simply the by-products of biological deficits, but are to a great extent influenced by environmental factors which disadvantage autistic people in comparison to their non-autistic counterparts.

Autism, Gender, and Sexuality

One consequence of the growing visibility of autism in the public sphere in the last three decades has been greater attention to the relationship between autism, gender, and sexuality in the lives of autistic people. In terms of gender, autism has come to be associated with particular forms of masculinity in scientific research and popular culture (Jack, 2014). Autism is directly associated with boys and men characterised as 'geeks,' males with 'narrow interests' in topics as such technology and science. Such interests as seen as evidence of the obsessive tendencies noted in the diagnostic criteria. For the psychological researcher Simon Baron-Cohen, a notable figure in the field of autism research, autism is best understood in terms of an "extreme male brain" (2004, p7). This type of brain is characterised by technical obsessive thinking and a difficulty to conceive of others' mental processes which means that autistic people struggle to empathise with others. In turn, pop cultural depictions of autistic people in films, books, and other forms of media often feature male characters who are geeks, with their autism portrayed as granting them exceptional scientific talents.

The characterisation of autism in masculine terms has increasingly received critical scrutiny. Greater visibility of autistic girls and women, for example, has led to criticisms that the diagnostic criteria for autism fails to recognise their experiences (Hill, 2012, 2016). Critics suggest that rates of diagnosis for women and girls have historically been lower than those for men and boys due to diagnostic bias, rather than autism itself being a masculine condition.

Furthermore, there has been growing visibility of autistic people who are gender variant, that is people who define themselves outside of the normative terms of the gender binary (Bumiller, 2008; Jack, 2014). Self-advocacy on the part of autistic trans, non-binary, queer, and gender non-conforming people, alongside scientific research suggesting connections between autism and gender variance (van Schalkwyk, Klingensmith, and Volkar, 2015), increasingly challenges the association of autism with masculinity.

In a similar manner, the relationship between autism and sexuality in autistic people's lives has received greater attention. As Groner (2012) highlights, traditional discourses regarding autistic sexuality, such as those present in clinical literature, frequently pathologise autistic people's sexualities as deviant, dangerous, or non-existent. Autistic sexuality is presented as a problem, with autistic people's sexual agency denied and restricted by non-autistic people. Autistic people are seen as inherently asexual or, in some cases, presumed to be heterosexual in a normative fashion. Such depictions of autistic sexuality have been challenged by autistic people themselves. Autistic people have made visible previously unacknowledged connections between autism and non-heterosexual sexualities. Autistic gay, lesbian, and queer people have asserted themselves as sexual subjects who resist dominant and oppressive social and cultural norms. In response to such developments, neurodiversity proponents such as Walker and Yergeau have developed and popularised the notion of the "neuroqueer" (Walker, 2015, para1) in online and offline autistic communities. This concept enables theorists and activist to examine the intersections of neurodiversity and queerness in terms of experiences and claimed identities, as well as producing critical perspectives which contest forms of normalcy surrounding ability and sexuality.

Research Focus

Debates and controversies over autism's relation to matters of gender and sexuality, particularly the significant role played by autistic people's own political advocacy, are the driving force for the present inquiry. As an autistic scholar myself, I have both a personal and academic interest in exploring the ways in which such debates and struggles have played out in the recent past, alongside a commitment to developing a more sociological account of the connections between autism, gender, and sexuality in autistic people's lives. I am interested in examining how autistic people have been represented as gendered and sexual subjects in the context of the UK, the context in which many of these developments have taken place over recent decades. As a result, I explore the ways in which certain representations, particularly biomedical and psychological ones, significantly influence popular knowledge about autistic people. In turn, I analyse how alternative perspectives developed by autistic people themselves have challenged these framings.

I am interested in how framings of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects are produced and reproduced throughout popular spheres. In this thesis, I consider how the interventions of various actors, ranging from scientists and journalists to therapists and autistic campaigners, shape understandings of autistic peoples' experiences in regard to autism, sexuality, and gender. I explore autistic people's experiences of gender variance and queerness and consider the ways in which normative understandings of gender and sexuality, present in framings such as the extreme male brain theory, inform perceptions of autistic people. I analyse several case studies regarding these topics over the course of the thesis, examining the implications of these representations for autistic people's everyday lives. In the process, I critically engage with relevant debates and controversies surrounding these issues.

As a scholar who aligns himself with the neurodiversity movement, I am concerned with the ways in which autistic people's own perspectives challenge influential representations. I am particularly interested in exploring the perspectives offered by autistic people who face other forms of social exclusion in relation to gender variance, racialisation, and queerness. I approach the inquiry with my own theoretical perspectives on gender, disability, and sexuality influenced by critical work from the humanities and social sciences.

In this thesis, I investigate the competing ways in which autistic people in contemporary British society are represented as gendered and sexual subjects. I argue that prevalent discourses frame autistic people’s genders and sexualities in essentialist, infantilising, and pathologising terms. These representations obscure the diversity of autistic people’s gendered and sexual experiences. In my view, normalised forms of gender and sexuality are imposed upon autistic people, with their own experiences consequently marginalised. Dominant discourses regarding autism, sexuality, and gender reproduce normalcy around ability, gender, and sexuality. This proves harmful to a range of social groups, within which autistic women, gender variant people, and sexually non-conforming people are particularly impacted. Critical analysis of how these discourses play out in highly visible spheres of popular culture, as well as the ways in which autistic people have responded to them, is crucial research to engage in at a moment when neurodivergent perspectives are struggling to access academic spaces.

Research Approach

Scientific and cultural representations of autistic people are connected to “the production and circulation of meaning” (Hall, 1997, p1) across various domains of social life. As Hall argues, the meanings of social phenomena are not objectively “found” in the world but are instead “constructed” (p5), with representation “central to the processes by which meaning is produced” (p1). Forms of scientific and cultural representation do not simply reflect the realities of autistic people’s lives, but instead can be seen to actively work to interpret and constitute people’s experiences as subjects. Representations of autistic people which circulate throughout society construct autistic people’s experiences in particular ways, with the meanings of such representations reproduced and challenged by various social actors. Framings of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects portray their experiences in particular ways, focusing on certain aspects and marginalising others. As Butler (2016) puts it in the context of visual and narrative framings of warfare:

> The frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality...the frame is always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing and de-legitimating alternative versions of reality.
>
> (pxiii)

Influential framings of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects, present in psychological accounts, journalistic commentary, and popular fiction, depict autistic people's experiences in particular ways. In doing so, they marginalise and erase aspects of autistic people's experiences which do not fit into the terms of such frames. In response, autistic people produce their own framings, presenting their lived experiences of gender and sexuality in their own terms. This thesis explores various forms of such representations and framings which have been produced and circulated over the course of recent decades. I consider influential biomedical, psychological, and cultural representations of autistic people alongside counter-representations produced by autistic people themselves.

In terms of theoretical material to guide my inquiry into such representations and framings, I have drawn upon a wide range of work from various fields throughout the course of my research. Work from the growing field of neurodiversity studies that is focused on autism, particularly the work of the autistic scholar Damian Milton referenced earlier, is coupled with conceptual frameworks and terms from disability studies more widely, along with work from queer theory and gender studies. Such work enables critical analysis of the central topics and attends to the operations of contemporary power relations and norms on the everyday level, including the responses of marginalised groups.

I deploy relevant concepts drawn from sociology and cultural studies to develop my analysis in the thesis. Scholarly work on "moral panics" (Cohen, 2002, pvi) and "counterpublics" (Fraser, 1990, p67), for example, are used to analyse controversies and struggles over the representation of autistic people in recent decades.

In terms of my methodological approach within the thesis, I carry out a textual analysis of a sample of texts produced and distributed since the 1990s. Initially, the thesis was developed with a discourse analysis approach in mind, but over the course of the research process my analysis of texts came to be more thematic in nature. Such a shift was informed by my engagement with cultural studies scholarship, such as Hall et al. (1978), which was concerned with exploring and contesting forms of representation in a politicised and critical manner. As such cultural studies scholarship highlights, the production, selection, and circulation of particular meanings within the public sphere are social processes in which various kinds of media texts play an integral role. Texts ranging from books and newspapers to films and television programmes produce and reproduce meanings for audiences in ways which can have profound cultural and political effects, for example, in terms of the representation of certain social groups. Informed by such a perspective, I came to collect together a sample of various texts focused on autism, sexuality, and gender as major topics. I viewed such texts as being relevant to my inquiry into representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects. As I complied my textual sample over the course of my investigation, I carried out a series of close readings of these texts. These close readings involved a consideration of how elements within the texts, such as the presence or absence of autistic perspectives or the kinds of information about autistic people presented by their authors, produced and communicated particular meanings to their audiences. In turn, I analysed these elements in relation to the theoretical material mentioned earlier, deploying work from various fields to help examine and challenge such elements. In my view, approaching the textual sample in such a way proved an effective means of exploring how autistic people are represented as gendered and sexual subjects. Carrying out such textual analysis enabled me to compare different texts to one another in various ways, for example, in terms of how they offered similar or contrasting framings of autistic people. Textual analysis also allowed me to consider the implications of these framings, for example, the receptions of such framings by both autistic and non-autistic audiences. As I demonstrate over the course of my inquiry, the texts I chose to include in my textual sample explore issues of autism, gender, and sexuality in diverse and contrasting ways.

I have chosen to focus on the period since the 1990s in this inquiry for several reasons. Firstly, as described in Bonnie Evans' account *The Metamorphosis of Autism: A History of Child Development in Britain* (2017), the historical period from 1990 onwards has seen the global popularisation of autism as a biomedical label. Autism research developed in the British context during this period has significantly influenced research elsewhere, whilst policy and legislative work developed in the UK, most notably the 2009 Autism Act, has come to shape policy frameworks in other parts of the world.

Furthermore, the emergence of the neurodiversity movement as a distinct social movement with its own set of theoretical perspectives has taken place over the course of the last three decades. During this period, as highlighted in Steve Silberman's *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and How to Think Smarter About People Who Think Differently* (2015), autistic communities began to form, often online, and to develop their own critical perspectives and forms of self-advocacy.

I have mainly focused on texts produced within the UK, although some texts featured in the thesis originate from the USA and Australia. I have chosen texts that have a significant role in shaping popular understandings of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects within the UK. Such texts includes ones which are either widely distributed by major publishers and platforms, such as Jessica Kingsley Publishers and Netflix, or are freely available online, such as collections by autistic self-advocates. With the UK functioning as a key site of knowledge production regarding autism, examining texts focused on autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects from this area proves useful to engage in since these texts, and the wider debates and controversies they reflect, have the potential to significantly impact the experiences of autistic people in other countries.

As I selected texts for the sample, I gravitated towards choosing and examining texts focused on autistic people's experiences as a subject matter which specifically engaged with gender and sexuality as topics. In the earliest stages of my research process I consulted a wide range of texts which engaged with autistic people's experiences, for example, child rearing guides aimed at the parents of autistic young people and neurodiversity activist writing. These texts did not explicitly discuss autistic people's experiences of gender and sexuality. Through this initial analysis of a range of texts I planned to highlight the ways in which texts could be understood as framing autistic people's gender and sexuality in particular forms. That is the absence of explicit discussion of these aspects within a text, such as a parental guide, could be seen to reproduce framings of autistic people as inherently asexual or as predominantly being men. These texts could, in turn, be contrasted with other texts in my sample which explicitly dealt with matters of autistic sexuality and gender. As the research process progressed, however, I decided to narrow my focus on those texts which more explicitly centred upon autistic people's experiences as gendered and sexual subjects. I came to view close analysis of these particular texts as offering the best opportunity to explore contemporary representations of autistic people and to consider the implications of such representations. As a result, the finalised textual sample came to be primarily composed of texts in which discussion and depictions of autistic people's gendered and sexual experiences formed integral parts. Other texts which did not explicitly focus on these matters were therefore largely excluded from my final sample. Only one text which did not explicitly focus on these matters, namely *Autism, Explaining the Enigma: Second Edition* by the influential autism researcher Uta Frith (2003), was featured in the final version of my sample. This was because the framings of autistic experience featured within this book have implications for autistic people's lives in general on account of Frith's status as a researcher. Autistic people facing particular challenges on account of their sexuality and gender are likely to be impacted by the framings of such an influential work circulating within the public sphere.

In addition, as I collected my textual sample I decided to concentrate on examining some texts focused on autistic sexuality and gender as central topics in great detail, as opposed to providing a more cursory form of analysis of a larger sample. As a result, certain texts featuring representations of autistic people's experiences as gendered and sexual subjects which I encountered were not incorporated into the final sample, as the inclusion of such texts would have resulted in repetitive and superficial forms of analysis that would have weakened the overall inquiry.

The sample I have chosen to analyse is composed of varying kinds of texts. Some texts are produced by scientific researchers and practitioners who study autism and work with autistic people and their caregivers. Other texts are produced by autistic people themselves and present the perspectives of autistic self-advocates. Some are intended to be clinical and therapeutic in nature, whilst others function as political commentary. The sample of texts is primarily composed of non-fictional work, although I pay close attention to one fictional text in Chapter 5 which I view as particularly significant in terms of shaping contemporary perceptions of autistic people. Certain texts are aimed at more niche readerships, such as those written by psychologists, whereas others, including self-help guides and newspaper articles, are intended for wider audiences. Some texts explicitly pathologise, infantilise, and essentialise autistic people, whilst others offer more nuanced approaches to the interrelationships between autism, gender, and sexuality in people's lives which explicitly challenge dominant framings of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects.

Despite the many differences between these texts, I argue that they all play a key role in the production and circulation of contemporary representations of autistic people. Some texts function as primary sites of knowledge about autistic people for non-autistic readers, for example, parental self-help guides, whilst other texts, such as autistic-self advocacy literature, propose alternative accounts to those found in mainstream culture. I am interested in how such texts work together to produce, reproduce, or contest representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects. I examine how pathologising psychological framings are reproduced in journalistic coverage of autistic people and consider the ways in which the neurodiversity movement's platforming of autistic people's own experiences has been reflected in the work of non-autistic authors.

As detailed later in this chapter, the texts are divided along distinct themes and genres, whereby texts of a similar form, for example, self-help books, or theme, such as explorations of the connections between gender variance and autism, are collected together into different case studies. As I explore the representations of autistic gender and sexuality and associated controversies through my analysis of various texts, I develop a multifaceted account of such phenomena, as opposed to restricting my focus to any one particular area or field. I investigate how different texts play reinforcing or disruptive roles in regards to the production and circulation of representations, with scientific research shaping fictional depictions, for example, whilst recent self-advocacy writings affect established therapeutic literature.

Much of the analytical work featured in this thesis can be viewed as being critical in nature. Over the course of my inquiry, I engage with and challenge the representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects which are featured in various texts. I examine and demonstrate the limitations of such representations, for example, by highlighting the ways in which they work to pathologise or essentialise autistic people's experiences. In this way, textual representations of autistic people often serve as objects of critique in the thesis.

At the same time, my analytical approach throughout the thesis is influenced by an engagement with postcritical work in the humanities and social sciences (Sedgwick, 2003; Latour, 2004; Felski, 2015; Ankers and Felski, 2017; Fitzgerald, 2017). Broadly speaking, such work can be understood as seeking to develop alternative modes of analysis and research rather than relying upon negative critique. Sedgwick, for example, questions "the methodological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice" (2003, p125), one which she associates with a primary focus on exposing the ideological subtexts of cultural objects and texts whatever a scholar's theoretical orientations (i.e. Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist). In a similar way, Latour suggests that "the critical spirit" may itself have "run out of steam" (2004, p225) in the contemporary period, arguing that scholarly efforts to expose the contingent and socially constructed nature of forms of knowledge have unwittingly provided “dangerous extremists” with a means of a undermining “hard-won evidence” (p227) regarding phenomena such as climate change. Postcritical scholarship suggests that the academic and political limitations of existing forms of critique, ranging from the promotion of reductive readings of texts to an inability to confront contemporary manifestations of scientific denialism, should encourage theorists and researchers to develop alternative ways of studying social and cultural phenomena. Fitzgerald (2017), for example, draws upon Sedgwick’s rejection of “paranoid reading” (2003, p147) in his analysis of the work of autism researchers. Fitzgerald’s analysis openly challenges perspectives which would characterise scientists who research autism as simply being biological or neurological determinists who must be challenged by critical sociologists, highlighting instead the complexities and ambivalences inherent to such research as it is actually practiced by scientists. In this way, mere critique proves an insufficient means by which scholars can analyse such phenomena.

In this thesis, I integrate elements of such postcritical perspectives into my own research. Like Sedgwick, I believe that an overreliance upon a mode of suspicion towards cultural objects and texts can prove reductive and restrictive when engaging in scholarly work. Similarly, I share Latour’s concern that a purely negative project of critiquing existing forms of social phenomena proves insufficient for confronting contemporary social and political problems. As Latour highlights, challenges to existing forms of scientific knowledge and expertise can come as much from conspiracy theorists as critical scholars, as demonstrated by the emergence of conspiracist tendencies around issues such as the role of vaccines in ‘causing’ autism (Hacking, 2006; Silberman, 2015), a phenomenon which should trouble scholars such as myself who are concerned with examining and challenging dominant forms of knowledge.

At the same time, I argue that there is a risk in totally abandoning critique when engaging in scholarly research regarding representations of autistic people. As my textual analysis highlights, there are aspects of such representations which require critical attention and which can be challenged for the ways in which they produce and reproduce troubling and harmful framings of autistic experience. To treat critiques of such aspects as being wholly negative and theoretically unproductive risks generating a rather dangerous form of depoliticised scholarship at a moment in time when active political interventions in research around matters of disability and autism are required. Although I agree with postcritical scholars that a singular focus on critiquing and deconstructing cultural objects and social phenomena can have limitations, forms of critique nevertheless remain politically and theoretically necessary when engaging with matters of autistic cultural and scientific representation.

Bearing these various issues in mind, at several points in my analysis I highlight aspects of the texts featured within my sample which I argue trouble or challenge harmful representations of autistic people. Such commentary accompanies my more critical engagements with those textual aspects which do reproduce such representations. Echoing Sedgwick, I argue that alternative ways of engaging with texts are necessary in current forms of research when wanting to explore the multifaceted aspects of texts, rather than singularly critiquing problematic elements. Engaging in explicit social critique remains important when analysing disablist framings of autistic people but, at the same time, I argue that highlighting elements of texts which challenge such harmful representations should form part of research into autism literature. As a result, I approach my textual sample in a manner which highlights how certain aspects, such as the platforming of autistic perspectives regarding their experiences as gendered and sexual subjects, offer potentials for challenging the oppression of autistic people and for promoting neurodivergent perspectives regarding gender and sexuality. I nevertheless remain critical of those textual elements which perpetuate disablism and other forms of oppression, and draw attention to such elements in my analysis in this chapter.

The following central research question guides my analysis throughout this thesis:

How are autistic people represented as gendered and sexual subjects in the contemporary United Kingdom and what are the implications of such representations?

The following additional questions focus my research as I analyse my textual sample:

1. How are framings of autistic experience produced within scientific research reproduced within popular forms of media?

2. In what ways do texts produced by autistic people themselves, such as autobiographical materials engaging with autistic experiences of gender and sexuality, challenge and inform popular representations of autistic people?

3. How can more inclusive representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects be developed within academic research and popular culture?

Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into eight chapters (including this introduction). Theoretical and historical material relevant to the whole thesis are explored in depth in Chapters 2-3. Chapters 4-7 are composed of four case studies. In the concluding Chapter 8, themes and issues analysed throughout the thesis are considered, with some thoughts on future research proposed.

Chapter 2 serves as a theoretical introduction to the material that informs the rest of the thesis. Work drawn from the fields of disability studies, gender studies, and queer theory is detailed and shown to be relevant to the sociological study of autism carried out in the thesis. In particular, the chapter explores the relevance of the social model of disability developed by scholars such as Mike Oliver (1990, 2013) for understanding autistic people's experiences. I argue that engaging with a social model approach enables a shift away from a focus on autism as a source of problems for individuals, as in biomedical and psychological models, towards a focus on how various aspects of social life, including gender and sexual norms, disable autistic people. In addition, I highlight how work from gender studies and queer theory regarding issues of non-normativity and the socially constructed nature of identity are relevant to critically engaging with the interrelationships of autism, gender, and sexuality. Drawing upon anti-essentialist and anti-normative theoretical work from Butler (2006) and others, I challenge pathologising and essentialist framings of autistic people and develop an understanding of autism as a socially situated aspect of people's identities which intersects with gender and sexuality.

I conclude Chapter 2 by critically exploring efforts by scholars such as Robert McRuer (2006) and Alison Kafer (2013) to synthesise work on disability, gender, and sexuality. Echoing these theorists, I argue that there are productive engagements to be made between feminist, disability, and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer) theory. I argue that such work opens up possibilities for political coalitions around issues of gender, sexuality, and disability, in which challenges to forms of disablism facing autistic people are connected to struggles against oppressive gender and sexual norms.

Having established the wide range of theoretical influences which informs the thesis, Chapter 3 offers an historical account of autism's emergence as a diagnostic label. I discuss a selection of influential accounts of autism, such as the theory of mind and extreme male brain framings proposed by psychologists including Uta Frith (2003) and Simon Baron-Cohen (1999, 2004) over recent decades, and examine how they relate to current diagnostic criteria present in documents such as the DSM and ICD. In doing so, I provide an historical account of the emergence of these framings, drawing on existing historical scholarship from Mitzi Waltz (2013), Steve Silberman (2015), and Bonnie Evans (2017). In the process, I introduce some of the key links between autism, sexuality, and gender which feature throughout the rest of the thesis.

Chapter 3 considers existing literature focused on neurodiversity by authors such as Walker, Yergeau, and Milton. I locate my own research within this field of work since it offers innovative ways of understanding autistic life which draw on autistic people's own perspectives, offering possibilities for contesting and overcoming the forms of discrimination and exclusion that affect autistic people. Building upon this work, I outline my own theoretical perspectives, perspectives influenced by neurodiversity, feminist, disability, and queer scholarship. Such perspectives inform my approach to the materials discussed throughout the thesis. My central argument is that rather than seeing autism primarily as a biological disorder, it should instead be understood as a socially situated aspect of personal identity which intersects with gender and sexuality in people's everyday experiences.

In Chapter 4, I explore how autistic people have been framed in popular texts which focus upon autistic people's experiences of gender and sexuality, primarily self-help texts produced during the last three decades in the Anglosphere. I critique elements in such texts which reproduce pathologising depictions of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects, such as characterisations of autistic people primarily in terms of their impairments. I highlight how such elements ignore the ways in which autistic people's difficulties can be understood and addressed through examining societal contexts.

At same time, I highlight how there are elements within mainstream self-help accounts which propose representations of autistic people which are more in line with the neurodiversity movement's challenge to pathologisation. These elements consider the role of social factors in negatively affecting autistic people and reject the marginalisation of autistic women, gender variant people, and LGBTQ people in dominant accounts of autism.

The texts I analyse in Chapter 4, for example, Nichols et al.'s *Girls Growing Up on the Autism Spectrum: What Parents and Professionals Should Know About the Pre-Teen and Teenage Years* (2009), reproduce and trouble influential representations of autistic people. Many of these texts are published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers for public audiences, with the authors of these texts seeking to advise non-autistic relatives and professionals on how they should treat autistic people and to inform autistic readers how to live their lives. These texts, I argue, are therefore particularly influential in terms of their effects on autistic people's lived experiences and as a result are worth examining as texts.

In Chapter 5, I engage in a close reading of the ongoing Netflix series *Atypical* through a visual analysis of episodes of the show's first two seasons (2017-2018). Set in the contemporary USA, the show focuses upon the experiences of an autistic teenage boy trying to find a girlfriend, and can be understood as a notable example of autistic representation in mainstream visual media in the present moment. Indeed, promotional materials surrounding the series have emphasised the ways in which the show's creators have tried to reflect the experiences of autistic teenagers (Fernandez, 2017).

I situate my reading of the series against the wider historical context of the association of autism with masculinity highlighted by Murray and Jack. I critically explore the ways in which the show's depiction of the autistic protagonist Sam reproduces and modifies the influential representation of autism as a masculine condition affecting 'so-called geeks.' In addition, I consider the contradictory elements of the show's depiction of autistic sexuality. I show how the series critically responds to the pathologisation of autistic people's sexualities, but in doing so offers a troublingly heteronormative portrayal.

Chapter 6 analyses recent controversies regarding the connection between gender variance and autism, primarily in the case of children and young people. In medical literature produced since the late 1990s, numerous practitioners and researchers have highlighted co-occurrences of cases of autism spectrum disorders and gender dysphoria in individuals (van Schalkwyk, Klingensmith, and Volkar, 2015). At the same time, recent decades have seen a growing visibility of individuals and communities affirming themselves as people who are simultaneously autistic and gender non-conforming (Rudacille, 2016). Such developments have encouraged speculation regarding the potential causal connections between these categories on the part of medical professionals, media commentators, and academics. Scholarship influenced by the extreme male brain hypothesis, for example, suggests that young autistic females' brains produce feelings of alienation which contribute to apparent gender dysphoria (Jones et al., 2011).

Wider visibility regarding autistic gender variant people across many societies has generated concern within sections of the population, with people who identify as autistic and gender variant viewed with suspicion. In particular, concerns have been raised by commentators such as Heather Brunskell-Evans and Michele Moore (2018) that autistic young people's deficits have led them to be misdiagnosed as experiencing gender variance. In this chapter, I analyse the controversies surrounding autistic gender variant young people, suggesting that such controversies have taken on the character of a moral panic. In such a panic, focused on protecting vulnerable young autistic people, autistic people are portrayed in infantilising terms. The historical infantilisation of autistic people is reproduced within narratives of autistic youth as the passive victims of harmful gender ideologies and manipulative activists. Possibilities for autistic self-advocacy to intersect with feminist and LGBTQ struggles are foreclosed by such a panic. Autistic children and young people have their own voices marginalised, as they are spoken for by medical professionals, educators, parents, and feminist critics participating in the panic. At the root of such a panic, I argue, are contestations over the meanings of childhood, disability, and gender as more established and normative framings are undermined. I argue that in navigating and confronting these contestations it proves possible to develop a more nuanced account of the relationship between autism and gender variance in people's lives.

To carry out an analysis of this panic I consider a range of texts, namely the documentary *Transgender Children: Who Knows Best?* (2017) by BBC Two Films, *Transgender Children and Young People: Born in Your Own Body* (2018) edited by Heather Brunskell-Evans and Michele Moore, and *Gender Identity, Sexuality and Autism: Voices from Across the Spectrum* (2019) by Eva A. Mendes and Meredith R. Maroney. Situating these texts in the wider context of research and controversies surrounding autism and gender variance, I examine how such texts approach these matters. In doing so, I draw upon work by scholars such as Jen Slater (2015), work which highlights the connections between disability and gender non-conformity and proposes political coalitions around these issues. Certain elements in these texts are critically examined for the ways in which they reproduce the influential representation of autism as a condition defined by deficits, such as the reductive causal account of autism as producing dysphoria offered in some of these texts. Such framings prove infantilising in nature, offering flawed accounts of autistic people's experiences of gender variance which can be theoretically and politically challenged from a neurodiversity standpoint. I highlight how more productive ways of engaging with these matters can be developed, with Mendes and Maroney's emphasis upon centring autistic people's own perspectives regarding gender and sexuality providing a better approach to these issues. This leads into Chapter 7's exploration of autistic self-advocacy literature.

In Chapter 7, I explore a sample of Anglo-American autistic self-advocacy literature, namely the collection *relationships and sexuality* (Ashkenazy and Yergeau, 2013), produced as a resource by the USA-based Autism Now Centre, The Arc and Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), and the zine *in camouflage: a zine on the intersection of autism and gender* (Disabled Students Campaign, 2017) compiled by the Cambridge University Students Union Disabled Students' Campaign. The former text collects autistic people's accounts of engagements with matters of intimacy and sexuality, such as relationship difficulties and political activism. The latter collection, meanwhile, compiles writings by autistic British students responding to Baron-Cohen's research into autism at Cambridge University. Exploring a variety of gendered autistic experiences, the zine serves as a direct challenge to Baron-Cohen's account of autism as essentially masculine. I view such literature as part of the development of autistic communities as counterpublics (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). Exploring this literature, I examine the representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects that these texts offer. I consider the ways in which self-advocacy accounts demonstrate the need for more pluralistic ways of generating knowledge which promote autistic voices. Having explored these texts, I argue that the development of socially-based neurodiversity informed approaches for understanding autistic people's gendered and sexual experiences are necessary to challenge disablist oppression.

In the final chapter, I review the conclusions drawn from my research analysis and discussion detailed in the previous chapters. I outline the main insights drawn from my research and relate them to my key research questions. I reflect on some of the limitations of my own inquiry and discuss potential areas of future research based on my findings. The chapter concludes with some final thoughts on conditions facing autistic people and possibilities for future social change.

Chapter 2: In Theory

Introductory Remarks

In this chapter I present a range of theoretical materials which provide conceptual frameworks and terms that are deployed throughout the rest of the thesis. Such work enables the development of a critical analysis of representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects over the course of this inquiry, with concepts outlined here applied to analyse aspects of empirical texts in subsequent chapters.

This chapter is divided into separate sections outlining various kinds of theoretical material, with each section accompanied by a discussion of the material's relevance to the thesis. I begin with a consideration of the field of disability studies, discussing and assessing several key concepts from the field that inform my analysis of the representations of autistic people in the selected texts. Work from disability scholars such as Mike Oliver (1990), Carol Thomas (1999), and Fiona Kumari Campbell (2001, 2009) plays a significant role in this inquiry, with my analysis influenced by their opposition to the dominance of biomedical framings and emphasis upon the socially determined nature of disability.

Anti-essentialist feminist work on gender from scholars such as Butler (2006) and Crenshaw (1989) are considered in depth in this chapter. Explorations of gender's socially constructed nature and intersections with categories such as sexuality and race provide useful theoretical work for understanding how gender, sexuality, and disability interact in the lives of autistic people. The emphasis upon social constructionist and intersectional analysis in such work enables a critical account of autism as it is lived by autistic people, as the category's entanglements with gender and sexuality figure across a range of texts explored throughout this thesis.

Queer theoretical work by scholars such as Lee Edelman (2004) provides the thesis with concepts which highlight the socially situated nature of sexuality and challenge the oppressive normalisation of heterosexuality. Queer theory offers materials for understanding the ways in which autistic people are affected by heteronormativity and work to challenge such normativity.

I conclude the chapter by discussing work which synthesises such critical perspectives, namely scholarship which considers the interrelationships between disability, gender and sexuality developed by Robert McRuer (2006), Anna Mollow (2012) and Alison Kafer (2013). Work by these scholars informs my engagements with autism, gender, and sexuality in the subsequent chapters. Such work facilitates analysis of the relationships between these categories within my textual sample, helping to conceptualise the ways in which intersecting disablist, gendered, and sexual norms are challenged by autistic people.

Disability Studies

As McGuire (2016) highlights, “there are very dominant, very powerful, and very limited sets of cultural scripts that we collectively have…when it comes to thinking and speaking about disability” (p15). Within these narratives “disability is near monolithically understood as an individual problem, in need of an individualized response/solution” (ibid). Disabled people’s movements have historically critiqued and organised against such narratives. As Thomas Shakespeare (2013) notes, "in many countries of the world, disabled people and their allies have organised over the last three decades to challenge the historical oppression and exclusion of disabled people" (p214). From the 1960s onwards “disability activists in the US, the UK, Scandinavia and other Western European countries campaigned for a change in the way that disability was understood, demanding the redefinition of disability from a personal, medical problem to a political one” (Watson, Roulstone and Thomas, 2012, p3). Concepts developed by disabled activists, such as the framing of disabled people as “a marginalised and disadvantaged constituency” and disability’s reconstruction “as a social rather than a medical problem,” have come to be “broadly constitutive of…disability studies” (ibid) since the 1970s. As McGuire puts it, disability studies has come to establish “an intellectual space to analyse disability as a cultural, geo/political, historical, and economic construct” (2016, p15).

Over time, disability studies has received critique “from within the discipline and from outside it” (Watson, Roulstone and Thomas, 2012, p4), with key concepts challenged and revised. Early disability scholarship’s focus on economic explanations for disabled people’s oppression has been contested by subsequent scholarship concerned with “critically unpacking structures of “ableism,” normalcy and the construction of disabled people as categorically “other”" (ibid).

Recent years have witnessed the emergence of “critical disability studies” (Goodley, 2013, p631). For critical disability scholars such as Dan Goodley contemporary theoretical and social developments demand that disability and disability studies be re-formulated. Rather than limiting analysis of disability to predominantly material and economic aspects, as in the case of early disability scholars who developed “analyses of material barriers to work, education and community living” (ibid), such scholars draw attention to and critically engage with "the cultural, discursive and relational undergirdings of the disability experience" (p634). In doing so, these critical disability scholars have contributed to debates surrounding understandings of disability.

The Social Model

The social model has come to play a major role within the field of disability studies since the 1970s, generating considerable debate and controversy within the discipline. The model emerged from within British disability studies and has proven influential in academic and political work throughout the world over the course of recent decades (Shakespeare, 2006).

The social model originates from the work of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), a radical group of disabled people active during the 1970s (Barnes, 2012; Shakespeare, 2013). UPIAS rejected existing forms of disability advocacy, for example, demands for welfare support, as politically ineffective. The organisation developed a structural critique of disabled people’s oppression and demanded radical action to overcome such oppression. UPIAS members argued that:

> It is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society.
>
> (UPIAS, 1975, p4)

In UPIAS's account disability describes a social phenomenon resulting from structural oppression, as people with physical impairments such as absent or non-functioning limbs face societal barriers. Disability activism is consequently focused on removing barriers which disable individuals, such as physically inaccessible environments and exclusion from workplace employment.

UPIAS's analysis informed the subsequent emergence of the social model of disability, with Oliver developing the concept in the early 1980s as a consequence of his engagements with UPIAS's work (Shakespeare, 2013). For Oliver (1990), disability within Western countries has come to be understood in terms of personal tragedy and medicalisation. The "personal tragedy theory of disability" (p15) portrays disability as individual misfortune, with disabled people deserving pity and charity from wider society. Meanwhile, "medicine has acquired the right to define and treat a whole range of conditions and problems that previously would have been regarded as moral or social in origin" (p48). Disabled people are viewed as defective on account of their impairments, requiring biomedical interventions to cure them.

Oliver acknowledges that discrimination against people with impairments has existed in various societies for centuries, but argues that disability in its current form in Western countries is primarily the result of industrial capitalism. As small scale forms of production were disrupted by capitalist industrialisation in the 18th and 19th centuries, he argues that "disabled people were excluded from the production process" (p27) and came to be "segregated in institutions of all kinds including workhouses, asylums, colonies and special schools" (p28). In this way, the "rise of capitalism and the development of wage labour" produced popular understandings of “disability as an individual pathology” and “individual able-bodiedness” (p47). Contemporary representations of disability which emphasise personal tragedy and medical defects obscure the realities of disability as a form of oppression caused by the capitalist mode of production.

To summarise, the social model of disability as developed by UPIAS and Oliver reconceptualises disability in terms of social oppression affecting those who have impairments. Such a model establishes a "distinction between disability (social exclusion) and impairment (physical limitation)” (Shakespeare, 2013, p216). As Barnes (2000) puts it:

> *Impairment* is the functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment.
>
> *Disability* is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers.
>
> (p2)

The social model was initially developed in the context of struggles involving people with physical impairments, but has subsequently been applied to analyse the experiences of disabled people in general. According to Oliver:

> all disabled people experience disability as a social restriction, whether those restrictions occur as a consequence of inaccessible built environments, questionable notions of intelligence and social competence, the inability of the general population to use sign language, the lack of reading material in braille or hostile public attitudes towards people with non-visible disabilities.
>
> (1990, pxiv)

Under such a framework, social barriers refer to more than just physical barriers, such as inaccessible public spaces, encompassing social norms which prove detrimental to people with impairments. In this way, the social model provides a broad account of the disabling effects of social factors upon individuals with a range of impairments, as opposed to being restricted to only those with physical impairments.

By focusing upon the ways in which disability results from “a comprehensive and pervasive system of economic and social barriers,” the social model “shifts the emphasis away from individuals with impairments towards restricting environments and disabling barriers” (Barnes, 2000, pix). In this way, proponents have challenged historically dominant “individual and biomedical understandings of disability” which “naturalise the association between the impaired body/mind and oppression through discourses of tragedy, loss and lack” (McGuire, 2016, p15). Indeed, as Shakespeare highlights, the model suggests that since disability is “a product of social arrangements” it “can thus be reduced, or possibly even eliminated” (2006, p28). This does not mean elimination in the disablist sense of nominal cures focused on removing impairments or eradicating people with impairments, but instead focuses on removing the societal forces that oppress those with impairments. In doing so, social model advocates hope to enable all individuals to participate as members of society.

Issues with Impairments

The emergence and widespread deployment of the social model of disability over recent decades has not been without controversy within disability studies. Some scholars have proposed abandoning the social model as an analytical tool, arguing that it is too flawed to be of any meaningful use for either scholarship or activism, whilst others argue that it remains politically invaluable. Work critically engaging with the potential limitations of the social model in regards to impairments are worth considering in depth here. The relevance of the social model as an analytical and activist tool is brought into question in such work, with such engagements having implications for the application of the social model to issues facing autistic people.

As Goodley (2001) highlights, a “turn to impairment” within disability scholarship since the 1990s has contested the ways in which impairment figures within the social model, as scholars have brought "impairment back to the forefront of disability studies” (p208). Such scholars, as Goodley notes, argue that the social model had placed impairment in an “uncomfortable and counter-productive exile within quasi-medical discourses" (ibid). Impairments, according to such an account, are uncritically accepted as biological facts of people’s lives within the social model. On the one hand, the model fails to critically engage with the social causes of impairments in people’s lives. At the same time, the model overlooks the social construction of particular impairments as problems. In this sense, the medicalisation of disabled people’s experiences decried by social model advocates is maintained within the model’s framework. To illustrate this issue, Goodley considers the case of people with learning disabilities. Goodley questions the existence of “some a priori notion of “mentally impaired”” (p211) which is independent of social context. He suggests that it is necessary to consider the ways in which nominally biological impairments are shaped by social factors, arguing that the social model fails to do so.

For Shakespeare, the social model proves socially deterministic in its approach to the issue of impairments. In his view, the model risks “ignoring the problematic reality of biological limitation” (2006, p40) in disabled people’s experiences. In emphasising the social oppression faced by disabled people and analogising their experiences with those of other groups who face discrimination, the social model fails to adequately attend to the negative realities which impairments pose for some people. As Shakespeare puts it, “many impairments are limiting or difficult, not neutral” (p41), with individual experiences of impairments ranging from being “comparatively unaffected” (p42) to “progressive degeneration and premature death” (p43). Impairments, he suggests, would remain a problem even if disabling barriers were be completely abolished. The suitability of the social model for understanding the complexity of disabled people’s lives therefore comes into question.

In responses to such critiques, Oliver (2009, 2013) argues that the model is not intended to focus on “the personal experience of impairment but the collective experience of disablement” (2009, p48). For him, the social model does not necessitate that disability scholars ignore impairments. At the same time, he argues that “the limitations that…functional impairments impose…are an inadequate basis for building a political movement” (ibid). Excessive focus on impairments, in Oliver’s view, depoliticises disability scholarship and advocacy.

The Social Relational Model

The reworking of the social model developed by Carol Thomas (1999) offers an intervention into debates surrounding impairments which is worth exploring. Thomas, like Goodley, is sceptical of the dualism established between socially caused disability and biologically based impairment found in certain formulations of the social model. Additionally, in a similar way to Shakespeare, she suggests that the social model offers a limited account of the significance of impairments in disabled people’s lives. For Thomas, such issues do not emerge from inherent flaws within the social model itself. Instead, she views them as the consequences of a lack of theoretical clarity in regards to the meaning and use of the model. She argues that within disability studies the social model “is actually interpreted in one of two different quite different ways: two social definitions of disability are operationalised and frequently conflated” (p40). The first is a “*social relational* definition of disability” (ibid) (italicised in original). This definition suggests that “disability is *a social relationship between people* (Disability=the social imposition of restrictions of activity on impaired people)” (ibid) (italicised in original). For Thomas, UPIAS’s original version of the social model fits this definition. She argues that “it is important to understand that the UPIAS social relational approach, that disability is the social imposition of restrictions of activity on impaired people, does *not* asset that *all* disadvantages or restrictions of activity experienced by people with impairment constitute “disability”” (p42). In this respect, the social relational framework accepts that impairments can place limitations upon people’s activities independently of social forces, thereby rejecting social determinism. According this model, experiences such as fatigue and chronic pain which restrict a person's activities do not constitute disabilities but can nevertheless be acknowledged as issues which matter for disabled people's everyday lives.

Thomas suggests that controversies over the social model emerge as a consequence of the use of a secondary definition of the social model in which "disability is *a property of the person with impairment*" (p40) (italicised in original). Thomas is critical of this form of the model, which she argues is theoretically flawed in nature. Under this model, she argues that "a two-stage proposition is involved: disability is restricted activity of the person (not being able to do things); and it is caused by social barriers" (p41). Thomas argues that "this *property* version of the definition of disability is widely used, or fallen back upon, within the disability people's movement" (ibid) (italicised in original). This version of the model proves socially deterministic in nature, since "disability is in existence wherever impaired people experience restricted activity" (ibid) according to the terms of such a model. Thomas suggests that this form of the model replicates medicalised understandings of disability, substituting "social factors…instead of impairment or chronic illness" (ibid) to explain restrictions facing people with impairments.

Faced with such theoretical confusion, Thomas argues that disability scholars and activists should focus upon the social relational model of disability and develop an understanding of what she terms "*impairment effects*" (p43) (italicised in original). Under this version of the model, she argues, disability can be understood as "a particular form of unequal social relationship which manifests itself through exclusionary and oppressive practices- *disablism* – at the interpersonal, organisational, cultural and socio-structural levels in particular societal contexts" (p40). Such a model proves compatible with understanding impairments and impairment effects as being "bio-social, that is, shaped by the interaction of biological and social factors, and…bound up with processes of social naming" (p43). In this way, the social relational model avoids the social determinism of certain versions of the model, whilst also developing a nuanced account of impairments. This account does not treat impairments as purely biological facts but instead recognises that they play a restrictive role in people's lives.

Disablism and Ableism

Disability scholar Finoa Kumari Campbell (2001, 2009) offers a set of theoretical concepts regarding the cultural dimensions of disabled people's oppression that complement the insights of the social model, namely those associated with what she terms "the Ableist Project" (2009, p3). Campbell suggests that much of the work of disability scholarship is concerned with "*disablism*...a set of assumptions (conscious and unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities" (p4). A focus upon the production of disablism informs political activities concerned with changing "negative attitudes, assimilating people with disabilities into normative civil society and providing compensatory initiatives and safety nets in cases of enduring vulnerability" (ibid). Campbell suggests, however, that primarily focusing on disablism proves theoretically and politically limiting, reinforcing an "able-bodied voice/lens towards disability" and ensuring that disability "continues to be examined and taught from the perspective of the Other" (ibid). For Campbell, more attention needs to be paid to "the production, operation and maintenance of ableism" (ibid). She defines ableism as:

> A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human.
>
> (2001, p44)

According to Campbell, such ableism permeates various aspects of social life, from science to formal politics, collectively enforcing "an ethos of compulsory able-bodiedness" (2009, p6). For Campbell, "two core elements" prove "central to regimes of ableism" (ibid). These two elements are "*the notion of the* normative (and normative individual) and the enforcement of a *constitutional divide* between perfected naturalised humanity and the abberant" (ibid). Disabled people who fall outside the norms of ableist society find themselves excluded from the category of the human. At the same time, "the normate individual" depends upon the marginalisation of "the unruly, uncivil disabled body" (p11) in order to exist. Ableist social relations may exclude and oppress those are who are categorised as disabled, but they nevertheless rely upon the existence of such a population in order to exist. Such an ableist society encourages the "belief that impairment or disability (irrespective of "type") is inherently negative and should the opportunity present itself, be ameliorated, cured or indeed eliminated" (p5). This ableism impacts upon all members of society, with Campbell declaring that "we are all regardless of our status, shaped and formed by the politics of ableism" (p17).

Internalised Ableism and Psycho-emotional Disablement

Work by Campbell and Thomas proves useful in considering the more affective and psychological dimensions of disabled people's experiences of oppression, dimensions overlooked by a narrow focus on external social barriers. In addition to locating ableism as part of wider society, Campbell draws attention to the role of "internalised ableism" (2009, p25) in people's experiences. Such internalisation forces those who are disabled to "constantly participate in the processes of disability disavowal" in which people "aspire towards the norm" (ibid) constructed by ableism and attempt to pass themselves off as not being disabled. Disabled people are compelled to adhere to "*compulsory ableness"* (ibid) (italicized in original), thereby negatively impacting their sense of self. Campbell suggests that although "disabled people do not passively and uncritically absorb negative representations of disability," societal ableism means that to live as a disabled person "involves a constant negotiation with competing responses to disability (both positive, negative and contradictory) often resulting in an ongoing state of ambivalence" (p27).

In her analysis of the social model, Thomas highlights how some disability scholars and activists see the social model's primary emphasis upon "socio-structural barriers" (1999, p24) as coming at the expense of engaging with "the cultural and experiential dimensions of disablism" (ibid). Thomas argues that it is important for disabled scholars and activists to pay attention to "socially imposed restrictions…which operate to shape personal identity, subjectivity or the landscapes of our interior worlds - and work along psychological and emotional pathways" (p46). She refers to these as the *"psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism*" (ibid) (italicized in original) which negatively affect people's "psycho-emotional well-being" (p47). Such psycho-emotional disablement involves people with impairments "feeling "hurt" by the reactions and behaviours of those around" them, as well as "being made to feel worthless, of lesser value, unattractive, hopeless, stressed or insecure" (ibid) by other people.

Relevance of Disability Studies to Autism

The disability studies scholarship outlined here provides a wide range of useful theoretical work to deploy when analysing representations of autistic people across a range of cultural, scientific, and political texts. Such material enables a critical interrogation of the representations of autistic people that circulate in the contemporary period and facilitates the development of alternative accounts. Work by scholars such as Oliver, Thomas, and Campbell may differ in certain respects, but overall such work challenges established ways of understanding impairments and disability which prove detrimental to disabled people. I argue that autistic people, in common with other disabled people, are impacted by disabling and ableist forces in social life. Experiences of impairment and disability in autistic people's lives are inadequately approached in the influential framings reproduced throughout scientific literature, journalistic commentary, and popular fiction. As a result, critical analysis from disability scholars proves useful in developing more sociological accounts of autistic people's experiences.

In this inquiry, I deploy the social model to understand disablement in autistic people's lives. I agree with Thomas that certain interpretations of the social model understand disabled people's experiences in socially deterministic ways. As a result I follow the social relational version of the model in my own analysis. This version of the model allows me to analyse autistic people’s lives in relation to social barriers, whilst at the same time recognising the lived experiences of those autistic people may see themselves as having impairments. For some autistic people who experience difficulties around communication, social interaction, and mental processing, accounts which understand their problems as purely the consequence of social barriers are likely to prove flawed. As an autistic scholar who struggles with such issues myself, I sympathise with such a perspective. As a result, the sociological analysis in this thesis avoids ascribing all the difficulties in autistic people’s lives purely to external social barriers.

In using the social relational model in this thesis, I nevertheless reject understandings of autism as a purely biological disorder. As Chapter 3 demonstrates, autism is historically a biomedical dialogistic label developed by a range of medical and psychological experts based upon their perspectives regarding autistic patients. As with other diagnostic labels, autism is located in processes of cultural construction, with autistic people’s experiences shaped by social environments. As a result, the analysis developed in this thesis critique framings of autistic people’s experiences as solely the result of biological deficits independent of social contexts.

Thomas’ social relational model of disability enables a nuanced understanding of the roles played by disability and impairment in autistic people’s lives. Autism as it is lived by individuals is neither a mere social construct or biological phenomenon, but rather is an embodied state which is biomedically categorised as a disorder. Impairments of communication and social interaction, frequently portrayed as the result of biological deficits, partially manifest as consequences of disabling social norms. As Oliver and Thomas’ accounts make clear, the social model not only enables an examination of material factors which impact autistic people, such as workplace inaccessibility, but provides a means of analysing social and cultural barriers which place restrictions on autistic people. This thesis argues that framings of autism which constitute it in terms of deficits, as found in scientific and popular texts, work to create such barriers for autistic people.

In place of medical framings of autism in terms of deficits, the social model suggests that the phenomena of disablement can be overcome through social change. Such a perspective informs the work of this thesis. Barriers facing autistic people can be analysed and challenged through the application of the social relational model. In this way the model provides an invaluable tool for contesting the oppression of autistic people. Indeed, as Wood (2017) suggests, the historically limited deployment of the social model to analyse autistic people's experiences in the UK, that is when compared to the dominance of biomedical approaches, demonstrates the necessity of using the social model to contest disablist oppression facing autistic people in the UK and elsewhere.

This inquiry primarily concerns itself with cultural, scientific, and therapeutic depictions of autistic people across a range of literatures. Such representations, I argue, inform and reflect disabling social relations which affect autistic people. Medical representations which pathologise autism and cultural representations of normalcy as being desirable, for example, can be internalised by autistic readers and result in harmful psycho-emotional effects. Similarly, biomedical and therapeutic literature which stigmatise aspects of autism risk encouraging non-autistic people, such as parents and professionals, to act in ways which are not conducive to autistic people's well-being. Contesting disabling forces in social environments, in my view, challenges the harms done to autistic people. This can include challenging material oppression, such as physical violence carried out against autistic people, or psycho-emotional disablement, for example, feelings of self-loathing experienced by autistic people.

For some disability scholars, such as Barnes (2012), an excessive focus on cultural issues overlooks the importance of material and economic issues. I am sympathetic to such an argument. Critiquing cultural representations of autistic people alone cannot challenge the disabling forces that negatively impact autistic people's lives. Such work will not abolish economic barriers or undermine forms of social detention and incarceration deployed against autistic people. In the current period of neoliberal austerity regimes which have seen significant attacks upon disabled peoples' material conditions (Oliver, 2013), with the UK, for example, witnessing punitive welfare reforms responsible for the suffering of many disabled people's (Ryan, 2019), a need for a materialist politics capable of addressing such oppression is obviously required. A narrow focus on matters of language and culture is clearly insufficient for confronting the problems of the contemporary conjuncture.

These issues aside, I argue that a critical exploration of influential representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects is an important project to engage in at the present time. I suggest that through exploring framings of autism produced across texts in recent decades, such an inquiry can analyse the wider material repercussions for autistic people. Cultural representations shape attitudes towards autistic people amongst families, professionals, and autistic peoples themselves, and inform material provision for autistic people. The historical underdiagnosis of autistic girls and women (Jack, 2014; Hill, 2016; Milner et al., 2019), blamed on the framing of autism as a masculine condition, offers a notable illustration of such phenomena. An exploration of the sexualised and gendered dimensions of autistic people's lives, one which analyses how such dimensions are depicted and shaped by cultural and scientific discourses, forms a key focus of my scholarship.

This thesis' exploration of the role of representations in autistic people's lives, including the lives of autistic women and gender variant people, should not be seen as an exclusive alternative to a focus upon direct material and economic barriers which harm autistic people. Representations of autistic people contribute to autistic people's psycho-emotional disablement. I agree with Thomas that psycho-emotional disablism forms "an important dimension of disability in society which needs to be challenged" (1999, p48), and that exploring cultural and scientific framings of autism which contribute to such disablism is therefore a worthwhile project. This thesis intends to be complementary to and in solidarity with theoretical and practical work engaging with material struggles around work, welfare, and incarceration which are ongoing within and outside the academy. Addressing other aspects of autistic people's lives in terms of what are usually understood as personal experiences and psycho-emotional matters remains important in these wider struggles against oppression.

Feminist Anti-essentialism and Intersectionality

Feminist scholarship proves vital when developing a critical approach for understanding autistic people's experiences of gender and, in turn, how such experiences are represented. The feminist scholarship drawn upon in this inquiry can be characterised as being anti-essentialist in nature. Over recent decades, work by feminist scholars such as Judith Butler (2006) and Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) has undermined frameworks which understand gender in terms of fixed essential categories. In contrast with other strands of feminism which depend upon essentialist notions of womanhood in order to develop theoretical work and enable political activism, anti-essentialist feminisms instead consider the constructed nature of gender and womanhood as categories, drawing attention to gender's relationship to other aspects of social life such as race and sexuality. In doing so, anti-essentialist feminists provide the foundations for developing forms of theoretical engagement and political activity useful for inquiries such as this one, inquiries which consider categories of disability, gender, and sexuality to be socially constructed and interconnected in nature.

Drawing upon work derived from feminist theory, poststructuralist thought, and linguistics, Butler's account of gender emphasises the performative and citational nature of gender, problematising forms of feminism which understand gender in essentialist terms. Opposing the notion that a category such as woman operates "as a seamless category" (2006, p6) with a clear foundation, for example, in terms of biology, Butler emphasises the instability of gender. Whereas strands of feminist thought and activism have historically established their politics on the basis of womanhood as a unifying category, Butler's work highlights the ways in which such a category operate within "the constraints of the representational discourse" (ibid) that it belongs to. In Butler's view, such discourses are connected to forms of social power. The "*regulatory practices* of gender formation and division" (p23) (italicized in original) play a key role in working to "constitute identity" (ibid). Rather than an individual's gender being innate or purely biological, a matter of pre-social or pre-linguistic reality, in this account "gender proves to be performative---that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (p34) in relation to existing discourse. By this, Butler means that actions on the part of an individual play a role within the construction of gender as an apparently stable identity. Gender results from "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (p45). In performing certain actions in relation to existing discourses regarding gender, a person's sense of gendered identity comes into being, appearing as a pre-social and natural aspect of the self.

Whilst "gender is always a doing" (p24) under this account, Butler argues that it must be recognised that this is "not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (ibid). In this sense, gender should be understood in terms of actions that construct it as part of personal identity, whilst remaining suspicious of the existence of a simple pre-social agency which freely chooses and determines gender. There is no pre-social individual capable of picking and choosing gender, as it is the construction of gender which plays an integral role in the very formation of the subject. What might be assumed to be "the internal coherence of the subject" (p23) and the existence "of an interior and organizing gender core" (p186) are better understood as the illusionary consequences of "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires" (p185) in relation to the terms of discourses. Butler uses the example of drag performances to illustrate this, with the drag performer's imitations of an apparent other's gender highlighting how in general "gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations," as the parodic element of the performance highlights "the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self" (p188). Butler's work clearly challenges the notion of gender as being essentialist in nature, highlighting how this notion emerges as a consequence of the body's repeated performed actions in relation to existing discourses, which creates the appearance of an inherent gender identity.

The performativity of gender in Butler’s account is connected to the operations of gendered and sexual power within society. Dominant discourses regarding gender work to “constitute the contemporary field of power” (p7) that subjects exist within, with “naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power” (p46) particularly influential within many societies. For gender variant and LGBTQ people whose genders and sexualities do not conform to dominant terms, discourses of masculine power and “compulsory heterosexuality” (p43) prove deadly. As Butler highlights, the “cultural emergence of those “incoherent” or “discontinuous” gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” challenges dominant “stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality” (p23). These individuals face policing, violence, and discrimination for their gender and sexual non-conformity. Butler’s form of anti-essentialist feminism challenges such oppression, with the destabilisation of gender norms providing space for alternative ways of doing and embodying gender and sexuality.

In her Black feminist work on the relationship between race and gender, Crenshaw (1989) challenges "a problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (p139), paying particular attention to the experiences of Black women. Crenshaw criticises "how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical analysis" (p140). She argues that such frameworks erase the experiences of those who face multiple forms of oppression and as a result limit feminist and anti-racist analysis. If gendered and racialised oppressions are considered as separate axes, for example, then the experiences of Black women receive inadequate attention. A singular focus upon sexism or racism fails to consider the ways in which such social oppressions interact and manifest in particular group’s experiences. Feminist theoretical work which fails to address racism ends up narrowly focusing on the experiences of white women, whilst anti-racist politics fail to consider the problems of Black women. As Crenshaw puts it, "Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourses because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender" (ibid).

Analytical failures of this kind, in Crenshaw's view, impede efforts to address structural oppression. Crenshaw illustrate her argument by highlighting examples of historical failures on the part of white feminists to analyse oppression in terms of "intersectionality" (ibid). These examples include the failure of anti-discrimination legislation to recognise the specificity of Black women's experiences and inadequate attention to the role of race in anti-sexual violence politics. In her view, intersectional approaches consider the ways in which categories such as race, gender, and class intersect to generate particular forms of oppression. Such analysis can inform political responses which are capable of engaging with the multiple dimensions of oppression facing specific groups. An intersectional approach, for example, can recognise that Black women are simultaneously affected by racism and sexism, with their experience of such oppression distinct from those of white women and Black men. Intersectional forms of analysis thereby challenge essentialist and universalist frameworks for understanding oppression, ones which Crenshaw argues merely describe the conditions of more privileged members of particular social groups. Feminist frameworks which fail to recognise the significance of race, for example, simply reproduce an account of white women's experiences. Intersectionality, by contrast, recognises specificities and consequently informs more effective forms of political activism capable of challenging oppression.

Feminist Theory In Relation to Autism

Autistic people, just like non-autistic people, are affected by gendered norms and power relations. Despite numerous theoretical and political challenges, essentialist framings of gender remain influential in contemporary societies. Certain strands of autism research, namely those informed by psychological work on autism and male and female brains by Simon Baron-Cohen (2004), contribute to the prevalence of biologically essentialist and deterministic understandings of gender (Fine, 2010; Jack, 2014; Rippon, 2019). This thesis argues that such framings of gender have negative implications for autistic people's experiences, as gendered oppression and disablism intersect in scientific and popular cultural representations of autistic people. Feminist theoretical work which emphasises the socially constructed nature of gender and the importance of intersectional analysis provides this thesis with useful material for contesting gender essentialism in representations of autistic people's lives.

In terms of autistic people's own gendered experiences there is increased public visibility of autistic women and gender variant people. Growing numbers of women seeking diagnoses have received popular media attention (Hill, 2012, 2016), whilst there has been greater attention paid to the experiences of trans and nonbinary autistic people (Jack, 2014). Anti-essentialist and intersectional feminist scholarship helps to understand such phenomena in relation to dominant framings of autism and gender reproduced in various texts examined in this thesis, such as representations of autism as a masculine condition.

Work which emphasises the unstable and constructed nature of gender proves useful in critiquing gender essentialism imposed upon autistic people's experiences. As Jack highlights, autistic people's personal accounts of gender, such as those found in online communities, frequently detail opposition to gender norms. Anti-essentialist feminist work is therefore useful for analysing autistic people as gendered subjects, paying attention to the ways in which some autistic people challenge dominant discourses of gender. Feminist scholarship of this nature facilitates critical engagement with therapeutic and popular cultural texts focused on autistic people which reproduce gender normativity.

Butler's emphasis on the socially constructed nature of gender provides a further key theoretical insight for this inquiry in terms of critically analysing how autism is experienced as a diagnostic category by autistic people. To be an autistic person is to inhabit the terms of discourse regarding the category, terms which compel particular ways of being whatever a person's own views or desires. As Butler demonstrates in regards to gender's role in subject formation, to be a subject involves being subjected to power as it manifests in contemporary discourses. To be autistic is, in part, to be constituted by biomedical categorisation. At the same time, as Butler highlights, the performative nature of identity means that the constitution of the subject is not simply deterministic. Autistic people do not uncritically accept or adopt the terms of the diagnostic criteria when developing their own identities. As McGrath (2017) suggests in his own application of Butler's work to analyse autistic adulthood, autistic people continually engage in performances to develop their identities in the face of social norms. In this inquiry, I examine the ways in which representations featured in my textual sample reflect and reproduce social norms, including gendered norms, and constitute autistic people in certain ways. I also consider the ways in which these texts may critique and resist such representations. The latter phenomena most clearly expresses itself in autistic self-advocate work exploring sexuality and gender, work which platforms experiences and perspectives marginalised by dominant discourses.

Historically, the reality of autism as an embodied state has been fraught with erasure. In recent decades, outside the terms of biomedicine and psychology, autism has been characterised in certain discourses as the negative consequence of medicine, as found in anti-vaccine narratives (Hacking, 2006; Silberman, 2015). Autism has also been critiqued as a cultural label problematically imposed on people (Runswick-Cole, Mallett, and Timimi, 2016). As a result, developing a critical account of autistic people's experiences in terms of social construction, an account influenced by Butler's work on gender, is a necessary project to challenge dominant terms which construct and disable autistic people. In critiquing framings of autism as a biomedical category and essentialist identity, I recognise the risks of de-legitimising autistic people's lived experiences. As a consequence, this thesis maintains some attachment to autism as a necessary descriptive label in the short term. Forms of autistic self-advocacy that have emerged in various countries in recent decades offer evidence of the potential of reformulated framings of autism to enable social mobilisation. Such advocacy demonstrates that although autism has been negatively characterised in the past, autistic people have able to re-formulate autism as part of their own advocacy. In my textual analysis

I explore aspects of various texts which develop accounts of autism in people's lives which prove anti-essentialist and non-pathologising in nature. Such accounts, as this thesis demonstrates, thereby challenge influential framings.

As Crenshaw's analysis of the specific conditions facing Black women demonstrates, intersectionality proves important when engaging in forms of theoretical and political work. In seeking to develop a critical inquiry into framings of autistic people across texts in this thesis, it is necessary to observe the ways in which social categories intersect in people's experiences and textual representations. This thesis suggests that people's experiences of autism cannot be understood separately from categories of gender and sexuality. This proves most evident in the cases of those who fall outside of the terms of influential autistic representations, for example, autistic women and gender variant people. It is important to analyse the ways in which social oppressions intersect within the framings of autistic people's experiences in the texts considered in this thesis. The pathologisation of autistic people's gender non-conformity in journalistic commentary, or pop cultural depictions of autism as a masculine condition affecting white male geeks, offer notable examples of such intersecting social forces. This thesis develop a more comprehensive and critical account of autism as it is experienced alongside other social categories, offering theoretical and political potentials for challenging forms of oppression which affect autistic people's lives.

Queer Theory

Queer Theory troubles dominant notions and forms of sexuality and is therefore useful for understanding autistic people as sexual subjects. As queer theorist Annamarie Jagose puts it, "queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the alleged stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire" (1996, p3). Queer theoretical work confronts essentialist understandings of sexuality, emphasising the constructed nature of sexual categories, practices, and identities (Jagose, 1996). As Michael Warner (2000) argues, "almost everything about sex, including the idea of sexuality itself, depends on historical conditions," with terms such as ""heterosexual" and "homosexual"…as ways of classifying people's sex…" (p10) being relatively recent in nature.

For many queer theorists, contemporary forms of sexuality exist within social contexts that are determined by the terms of "heteronormativity," namely "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent-that is, organised as a sexuality-but also privileged" (Berlant and Warner, 2000, p312). Under heteronormativity, other forms and expressions of sexuality are marked as deviant and subjected to various forms of violence, policing, and discrimination. As Warner puts it:

> The culture has thousands of ways for people to govern the sex of others-and not just harmful or coercive sex, like rape, but the most personal dimensions of pleasure, identity and practice. We do this directly, through prohibition and regulation, and indirectly, by embracing one identity or one set of tastes as though they were universally shared, or should be.
>
> (2000, p1)

Queer theorists theoretically and politically oppose the dominant norms of contemporary heteronormativity at a moment when other currents within LGBTQ politics seek assimilation into mainstream society through initiatives such as the legalisation of marriage for non-heterosexual couples (Duggan, 2003). Instead of promoting acceptance or seeking integration into straight society, queer theoretical work challenges major aspects of contemporary life including "capitalist accumulation, normative ethical paradigms, the cultural ethos of good performance and productivity, narcissistic models of self-actualization, the heteronormative family, and related reproductive lifestyles" (Ruti, 2017, p7). Warner, for example, rejects the desirability of normalcy, suggesting that however attractive the desire to appear normal or seek acceptance might prove for LGBTQ people, activist history "should have taught us to ask: whose norm?" (2000, p59). In a similar way, José Esteban Muñoz (2009) bemoans “the erosion of the gay and lesbian political imaginary” signified by efforts to embrace mainstream respectability such as seeking to integrate LGBTQ people into “the flawed and toxic ideological formation known as marriage” (p21). Muñoz instead champions a radical queer utopianism aimed at contesting the oppressive aspects of contemporary social reality, declaring that “the here and now is a prison house” and that queer people “must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (p1).

Some of the most explicitly anti-normative queer theoretical work can be observed in what Muñoz terms the “antirelational turn in queer studies” (p11), best exemplified by the work of Lee Edelman (2004). For Edelman, contemporary societies are dominated by the terms of “reproductive futurism: terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the public domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (p2). Such reproductive futurism is symbolised by the figure of the Child, a figure which structures contemporary social reality and political possibilities. As Edelman puts it, the “Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” (p3). For him, struggles over abortion access and anti-pornography initiatives demonstrate the integral role played by concerns with the well-being of children and future generations within contemporary social life. Edelman argues that queerness involves opposition to the figure of the Child and the imperatives of reproductive futurism, with queer people’s abjection from the existing social order situating them in “the place of the social order’s death drive” (ibid). Queerness in this framing “names the side of those *not* “fighting for the children”” (ibid) (italicised in original), with queerness understood by Edelman as inherently antipolitical in its opposition to a political reality totally determined by futurity and the “fascism of the baby’s face” (p75).

Queer Theory's Relevance to Studying Autism

One of the major concerns of this thesis is the representation of autistic people's sexualities across various texts. Work developed in the field of queer theory offers useful theoretical material to deploy when engaging critically with sexuality and autism in the selected texts. Queer theoretical work challenges framings of autistic people's sexualities which are pathologising and infantilising in nature. Such work draws attention to resistant elements within texts which develop alternative framings of autistic sexuality outside the terms of heteronormativity, for example, affirmative accounts of autistic people's sexual non-conformity.

In recent years there has been increased attention to apparent connections between autism and LGBTQ identities within academic research and popular media commentary. An article on the autism research website *Spectrum* written by paediatric neuropsychologist John Strang, for example, draws attention to "emerging evidence which suggests that autistic people are more likely to identify outside of conventional genders and sexualities than the general population is" (2018, para3). At the same time, Strang suggests that "in contemporary media, portrayals of autistic people are typically stereotyped and conventional" (para2), with autistic people framed as heterosexual and gender conforming. In this respect, it would appear that a disconnect exists between popular representations of autistic people and autistic people's own lived experiences. Autistic people's engagements with matters of sexual and gender identity are not always in line with heteronormative norms, with cases of autistic sexual and gender variance inadequately accounted for in popular media representation.

In this respect, queer theory's emphasis upon critically analysing the formation of sexual norms and categories and on contesting the ways in which particular sexualities and forms of sexual expression are privileged or policed proves useful in the development of this thesis. On the one hand, queer theoretical work critiques representations of autistic people which appear to conform to the terms of heteronormativity, whether these be in terms of advice offered in regards to young autistic people's sexual development, or the narratives created for autistic characters within fiction. As with other cultural and scientific texts in heteronormative societies, texts discussing autism reflect and reproduce social norms regarding (hetero)sexuality, such as the presentation of heterosexuality as being normal when compared with other sexualities. Queer theoretical work, therefore, offers a means of analysing and challenging such aspects in texts, pointing to the ways in which such aspects are the product of particular social conditions, as opposed to being natural or essential truths about sexuality which autistic people must accept.

In addition, queer theory is well suited to understanding autistic people's own identifications with forms of sexuality and gender outside of the terms of heteronormativity. In a similar vein to the challenges against normativity issued by queer theorists such as Warner and Muñoz, I argue that autistic LGBTQ people in their own actions and writings contest the dominant aspects of social life regarding sexuality and gender which they are expected to conform to. The emergence of theoretical work seeking to connect queer theory and activism with that of autistic people's participation within the neurodiversity movement under the banner of the "neuroqueer" (Walker, 2015, para1) offers clear evidence of this. Similarly, Edelman's emphasis upon challenging the ways in which heterosexual reproductivity plays a key role in shaping political futures has been developed in productive ways by disability scholars which prove useful for analysing representations of autistic people, as will be demonstrated in the following section of this chapter.

Theoretical Syntheses-Gender, Sexuality and Disability

Various scholars, many drawing upon the theoretical literature considered so far, have sought to develop accounts of the ways in which gender, sexuality, and disability interact and are co-constitutive in people's experiences. Some work, notably that of Thomas, seeks to develop work around gender and sexuality in relation to the British tradition of disability studies centred on the social model of disability discussed earlier. Work by American scholars such as Robert McRuer (2006), Anna Mollow (2012), and Alison Kafer (2013), on the other hand, deploy insights from queer and feminist theory to study disability. Such work views matters of sexuality, such as the pathologisation of non-heterosexual sexualities under the norms of heteronormativity, as closely entwined with matters of disability. Consequently, such scholars advocate for alliances between LGBTQ and disability movements in order to challenge forms of oppression.

Gender and Disability

As Watson, Roulstone, and Thomas note, disabled feminists have critiqued work in disability studies for failing to "adequately theorize the experience of disability from a gendered perspective" (2012, p4). Thomas' work on the social relational model considered earlier in this chapter offers a major intervention which seeks to provide a theoretical account of disablism in relation to gendered oppression. As Thomas argues, "the experience of disability is always gendered…disablism is inseparably interwoven with sexism (and racism, and homophobia, and so on)" (1999, p28). She highlights how both disability and feminist scholarship have historically failed to account for the experiences of disabled women. The former, in focusing upon issues seen as concretely materialist and public in nature, have practiced a masculinist form of politics, with those such as Oliver promoting "the view that some "personal" issues to do with living with either disability or impairment effects are "private" matters which should not be foregrounded by the disability movement" (p74). Such a viewpoint fails to consider how in the case of many disabled people, including disabled women, the personal dimensions of disablism and impairment have profound social and political significance. In Thomas' view, this stance leaves issues such as "self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, sexuality, family life and so on" at the mercy of "psychologists and others" (ibid) who can explain disabled people's experiences of these matters in terms of personal tragedy and medicalisation.

At the same time, Thomas argues that feminist writers and activists have historically failed to account for disabled women's particular experiences. She notes how disability has often historically figured in feminist work in terms of women being expected to perform gendered caring labour for people with impairments. Such work establishes an analytical binary between women and disabled people as groups. In addition, Thomas suggests that feminist scholarship on the social construction of gender presents disability scholarship with useful insights, but that at the same time there are elements of discursive and social determinism in such accounts ill-suited for explaining disabled women's experiences of disability and impairment.

Faced with such failures, Thomas suggests that disability politics and theory must connect with matters of gender. To do so, Thomas focuses upon developing "a non-reductionist materialist feminism" (p143) in order to analyse issues of disability, impairment, and impairment effects, including the ways in which such issues are gendered. Using the social relational model of disability outlined earlier, such a theoretical framework proves able to consider issues relating to gender and disability which are discounted in more orthodox disability studies work. At the same time, such a framework pays attention to the importance of material factors in disability politics, in contrast to strands of feminist theory which are overly concerned with issues of discourse and social construction. Such theoretical work is thereby intended to better reflect and understand the specificity of disabled women's experiences.

Queer and Crip

As Mollow and McRuer (2012) highlight, "rarely are disabled people regarded as either desiring subjects or objects of desire," with "the sexuality of disabled people…depicted in terms of either tragic deficiency or freakish excess" (p1) in the cultural mainstream. As with other aspects of disabled people's lives, disabled people's sexualities are characterised in pathologising terms. In certain accounts, disabled people are infantilised or totally de-sexualised, whereas in others disabled people are depicted as sexually problematic or threatening. Mollow (2012) points to the example of "cognitively disabled people" (p286) as a group who are particularly subject to such representations. Such people "are commonly depicted as childlike and asexual but are also often feared as uncontrollable sexual predators" (ibid) on account of their impairments. The presence of impairments or disability in such accounts, whether in biomedical or psychological literature or in popular culture, are connected to sexuality in ways that disabled scholars and activists seek to critique. Such pathologisation of disabled people's sexualities contributes to wider dynamics of disablism, with disabled people denied a key aspect of intimate life which is available to others.

In order to analyse and challenge such stigmatisation, some scholars engaging with the politics of disability and sexuality have drawn upon queer theoretical work. For these scholars, dialogue between queer theory and disability studies enables critical analysis of the relationship between the categories of disability and sexuality. Such work, in turn, allows disability scholars to develop critiques of the dominant understandings and norms that exist regarding these categories.

McRuer (2006) develops an account of the relationship between disability and sexuality which posits that the oppressions which shape such categories are closely entwined. McRuer suggests that "able-bodiedness…masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things" (p1) in a similar manner to heterosexuality under heteronormativity. For him, "the system of compulsory able-bodiedness, which in a sense produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness" (p2). Identities of able-bodiedness and heterosexuality "are linked in their mutual impossibility and in their mutual incomprehensibility" (p9). Such identities are "simultaneously the ground on which all identities supposedly rest and an impressive achievement that is always deferred and thus never really guaranteed" (ibid). No one can truly measure up to the standards of ableist or heterosexist norms, with those falling outside of such norms marginalised.

For McRuer, recent struggles by LGBTQ and disabled people have resulted in a form of liberal tolerance being extended towards such groups on the part of able-bodied and heterosexual people. He argues that such tolerance has nevertheless not resulted in equality for those who are disabled or queer. Consequently, McRuer argues for a critical engagement with the dominant norms of sexuality and disability. As part of this engagement, he encourages the use of the term “crip” (p33) by disability scholars and activists. In the same way in which queer theory and activism has reclaimed the historical slur of queer to describe a critical perspective, McRuer argues that disability scholarship should reclaim the disablist insult crip to help develop a critical theoretical and political stance which challenges compulsory able-bodiedness.

For Mollow, the anti-relational, negative queer critique developed by those such as Edelman provides a means of critiquing the marginalisation of disabled people in relation to matters of sex. Mollow suggests that within “disability theory…sex can no longer be conceived of as a subfield or specialized area of investigation” (2012, p287). Instead, she argues “that it is impossible to think about either term, “sex” or “disability,” without the reference to the other” (ibid). In Mollow’s account, disability ought to be understood in terms of “identity disintegration, lack and suffering” (ibid), the terms in which sex is figured within Edelman’s Lacanian psychoanalytical framework. Echoing Edelman’s association of queerness with anti-social negativity, Mollow wants disability to be framed as that which is rendered abject by the dominant social order. Indeed, she highlights that the terms which Edelman deploys in relation to queerness reflect impairment and disability, with queer people having their sexualities categorised as unhealthy and the negativity which queerness constitutes understood in terms of injury and suffering. In this way, instead of wanting to positively valorise disability as a category, as in the case of forms of affirmative identity politics, Mollow’s work suggests that those who are categorised as disabled should engage with these issues of negativity present in queerness and disability.

Furthermore, Mollow builds upon Edelman’s critique of futurity, proposing an accompanying concept to Edelman’s reproductive futurism which she terms “rehabilitative futurism” (2012, p288). In her view, politics and futurity are not only determined by the terms of heteronormativity, as in Edelman’s account, but are structured in terms hostile to the existence of disability and impairment. In Mollow’s account, “futurity is habitually imagined in terms that fantasise the eradication of disability” (ibid). She argues that such a futurism is evident in ableist fantasies of cures and historical manifestations of eugenics, for as Mollow notes, “procreation by the fit and elimination of the disabled, eugenicists promised, would bring forth a better future” (ibid). The symbolic figure of the Child, she argues, is not only threatened by queerness but by disability. As Mollow puts it, the figure of the Child “who, without a cure, might never walk, might never lead a normal life, might not even have a future at all” is deployed against those who would dare “come out *for* disability” (ibid) (italicised in original) by resisting forms of oppression against disabled people. Appeals to develop cures for disabled children, represented in infantilised, pitiable terms in popular media, coexist alongside the contemporary realities of institutionalised disablism which harm the lives of disabled people. The figure of the Child thereby legitimises the pathologisation and elimination of forms of sexual deviance and impairment which may threaten the continuation of the present social order.

Kafer (2013) develops a similar line of argument regarding the relationship between sexuality and disability as understood through the critical lenses of queer theory and disability studies. Kafer considers the ways in which dominant cultural imaginaries pathologise what are understood as disability and impairment, in which the elimination of these aspects of life is presented as desirable. In a similar way to Mollow, Kafer adapts the queer critique of futurity offered by Edelman to critique the situation facing disabled people. In the same way in which queerness is presented as hostile to the future under the terms of reproductive heterosexuality, disability and impairment are, according to Kafer, depicted as hostile to futurity under the terms of contemporary disablism. As Kafer puts it:

> If disability is conceptualised as a terrible unending tragedy, then any future that includes disability can only be a future to avoid. A better future, in other words, is one that excludes disability and disabled bodies; indeed, it is the very *absence* of disability that signals this better future. The *presence* of disability, then, signals something else: a future that bears too many traces of the ills of the present to be desirable. In this framework, a future with disability is a future no one wants, and the figure of the

> disabled person, especially the disabled foetus or child, becomes the symbol of this undesirable future.
>
> (pp2-3) (italicised in original)

As in Mollow's account, Kafer suggests that futurity is connected to the figure of the Child. Under current cultural terms, she suggests that we are all compelled to want and ensure that "our children" are "more healthy, more active, stronger and smarter than we are," with the figure of "the Child through whom legacies are passed down" one that is "without doubt, able-bodied/able-minded" (p29). Such a cultural imaginary contributes to and legitimises "a politics of endless deferral that pours economic and cultural resources into "curing" future disabled people (by preventing them from ever coming into existence) while ignoring the needs and experiences of disabled people in the present" (ibid). The disabled child therefore must be eliminated, with all impairments identified and cured. To propose an alternative understanding of disability, or to defend the viability of a child categorised as disabled "is to be disordered, unbalanced, sick" (p3) under such terms. In this way, disablism produces "a *curative imaginary*, an understanding of disability that not only *expects* and *assumes* intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention" (p25) (italicised in original).

For Kafer, the interrelated nature of heteronormativity and disablism points to productive potentials for alliances between feminist, disabled, queer and trans theory and activism. A futurity based upon reproductive heterosexuality and the elimination of disability through cures can be contested by alliances between different communities and a recognition of the interrelated nature of oppression. She argues that such alliances must include those with non-physical impairments, populations who are overlooked by a primary focus on compulsory able-bodiedness but are themselves subject to the oppressive forces of "able-mindedness" (p17).

Entanglements of Disability, Sexuality, and Gender Applied to Autism

As this thesis argues, autism is intimately entangled with matters of gender and sexuality, from the gendered nature of diagnosis historically to contemporary intersections between neurodiversity and LGBTQ communities. As a consequence, work by scholars such as Thomas, McRuer, Mollow, and Kafer analysing the interrelated and co-constitutive aspects of disability, gender, and sexuality are particularly useful for analysing and contesting the dominant ways in which autistic experiences of gender and sexuality are represented in various accounts.

As Thomas highlights, gender and disability are closely connected in nature, with analysis of disability necessarily involving a critical consideration of gender. As highlighted in this thesis, many dominant accounts of autistic life typically understand autism as being a masculine condition or fail to provide an adequate account of other gendered autistic experiences. As a consequence, following Thomas' example of paying attention to the significance of gender in shaping experiences of disability and impairment is important. In particular, Thomas' emphasis on acknowledging the personal, but nonetheless political, dimensions of disability and impairment informs my engagements with texts throughout this thesis. Self-help texts prescribing particular forms of gendered behaviour for autistic youth or self-advocacy literature discussing the personal experiences of living as an autistic person in a disabling society may not appear as politically charged as open political struggles around material and public barriers, but I argue that critical engagement with such texts in terms of their representations remains important. Considering how autistic life is represented in the more intimate and everyday aspects of general social life is a worthwhile political project, I argue, with Thomas' work greatly influencing my perspective.

In my view, sexuality, gender, and disability are indeed co-constitutive, with dominant oppressive norms regarding these categories closely linked in the ways highlighted by McRuer, Mollow, and Kafer. One cannot treat these categories separately when it comes to analysis. It is not that autism exists purely as an essential state or identity objectively removed from matters of gender and sexuality, with one simply adding the latter categories to the former i.e. “autism *and* gender” or “autism *and* sexuality.” Autism as it is lived is entangled with sexuality and gender in deeply embodied ways on the level of everyday experiences. Autism as deviance is understood not only through disablist terms but also through the terms of sexuality and gender, with autistic people affected by compulsory heterosexuality as much as compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness. As accounts offered by those such as Jack, Silberman, Evans (2017), and Yergeau (2018) highlight, the history of autism has long been entangled with dominant concepts and norms regarding gender and sexuality. Such entanglements have ranged from the efforts of Norwegian-American clinical psychologist Ole Lovaas to cure both inappropriate behaviours in autistic children and femininity in boys in the latter part of the 20th century (Silberman, 2015; Yergeau, 2018), to the emergence of autistic male geeks and savant as pop cultural figures in recent decades (Jack, 2014). I argue that it is therefore imperative to critically explore such representations of autistic people’s gender and sexuality in order to develop an adequate account of autistic life under current social terms. The oppression of autistic people does not simply mirror the oppression of women, gender variant people, and LGBTQ people, but is closely connected to such oppression, as this thesis highlights in its analysis of various texts.

In challenging dominant norms regarding the categories of disability, sexuality, and gender as they play out in framings of autistic experience, space can in turn be opened up for considering more diverse forms of social being and expression. The narratives of autistic people whose gendered and sexual ways of being operate outside the norms of heterosexual and gender normativity provide one example of such a challenge, as their accounts speak back to dominant discourses regarding what it means to be autistic, de-centring the framing of autism as a condition affecting straight white men.

In embracing such anti-normativity, I follow Kafer’s emphasis upon developing alternative futurities for disabled people, including autistic people. In the contemporary moment autistic people are subject to the forces of rehabilitative futurism and the curative imaginary identified by Mollow and Kafer. Autism is understood as a developmental disorder, one that delays and hinders the development of what are understood as normal forms of social interaction and communication. As opposed to acceptance of autistic people's differences or a primary focus upon changing social conditions which work to affect autistic people, responses to autism often seek to rehabilitate or indeed cure the apparently negative condition that is autism. Common forms of therapeutic advice offered to the parents and carers of autistic people, such as applied behavioural analysis (Yergeau, 2018), emphasise behavioural change on the part of autistic people themselves in order to fit in with society, whilst major research funding and charity fundraising goes towards projects exploring or promising potential cures for autism (Silberman, 2015; McGuire, 2016). Autism constitutes a "dangerous future" (2016, p159) for the current social order and autistic people and their forms of non-conformity are evidently not desired in certain forms of futurity.

As Kafer remarks, there is a strong temptation when faced with the contemporary social order to follow Edelman and Mollow and critique the future as a category inherently connected to the maintenance of forms of social oppression. The historical experiences of autistic people are marked by forms of institutional medical abuse, intimate family violence, and incarceration connected to the desire for a future without autistic people. As an autistic person myself I find such a denunciation of the current social order and a rejection of its futurity compelling in nature. I am therefore sympathetic to Mollow's call for disabled people to embrace our position as being socially pathologised. Autistic people, like other disabled people, are portrayed as perverse or deviant figures under current social norms around ability, gender, and sexuality. Autistic people fail to interact in appropriate ways, fail to develop 'normally,' and fail to integrate into social environments. Manifestation of gender and sexual non-conformity amongst autistic people offer notable examples of our apparent failure to integrate properly. Attempting to fit in with dominant norms, including those around sexuality and gender, through disguising our autistic aspects or desiring normalcy further contributes to our experiences of distress, as we experience internalised ableism and psycho-emotional disablement. In my view, embracing the fact that we are different in ways to those demanded by the current social order is an important and necessary response. The critique of a future which, on its own terms, must simultaneously acknowledge and exclude autistic people in order to exist forms an important part of the intervention made by this thesis.

I am hesitant, however, to follow those such as Edelman and Mollow down a purely anti-political path. As Kafer suggests, the practicalities of disabled people rejecting the current social order and future on its own prove difficult and there remain possibilities for changing society so that is more hospitable to those who are currently disabled. Kafer's work emulates the queer utopianism of Muñoz's project, a project Muñoz himself developed as an alternative to Edelman's anti-social abandonment of the category of the future. In producing this thesis, I too want to make a claim for the possibility of producing futures for autistic people beyond the currently dominant terms of disablism, heteronormativity, and gender normativity. Autistic people may currently be pathologised, portrayed as the victims of a disorder which poses problems for their families and for wider society, but this does not need to be forever the case. Struggles over the nature of autistic life informed by more critical theoretical perspectives pave the way for alternative social arrangements more conducive to autistic people's well-being. The current horizons of political and social life are, as these critics suggest, subject to the dominance of reproductive and rehabilitative futurisms, ones which oppress autistic people who are represented as deviant and problematic. Such horizons can be overcome through, as Kafer's work suggests, alliances between movements focused on matters of disability, sexuality, and gender. Indeed, challenging the oppressive dimensions of autistic people's experiences has implications for contesting disablist, sexual, and gendered oppression more widely.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has provided an overview of various strands of theory drawn from different fields that are utilised in this thesis in order to develop a critical understanding of autistic life in relation to gender and sexuality. Disability scholarship provides various concepts such as the social model of disability, psycho-emotional disablement, and internalised ableism that can be used to understand autistic experience in terms of social oppression and political resistance, enabling analysis of autism beyond the medical and psychological terms. Work from feminist and queer theory allows for understandings of gender and sexuality that highlight the constructed nature of these categories and the ways in which such categories intersect. Such perspectives prove particularly useful in helping to understand autistic people's lives as gendered and sexual subjects, moving away from framings of autism as an inherently masculine condition and instead focusing on autistic people's own experiences of gender and sexuality. In doing so, I take seriously the experiences of autistic people whose sexualities and genders are non-normative.

The theoretical work connecting these fields in turn develops multifaceted accounts of the relationships between gender, disability and sexuality as categories, with my own thesis in seeking to highlight the interplay of such categories in autistic people's lives as found in the range of texts considered in this thesis. The thesis now turns to a closer historical account of the emergence of autism as a category and its contested meanings over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, in order to provide background for the analysis carried out later on in the thesis.

Chapter 3: What Is Autism?

Autism-From Diagnosis to Critique

The history of autism has been marked by several major shifts in scientific and popular understandings over the course of the last century. From early psychoanalytical work to more recent neuroscientific studies, autism's meaning has undergone considerable changes. Nevertheless, contemporary work across various fields still struggles to provide an adequate account of what autism is, with debates and controversies raging over its causes, attributes, and effects. As Murray (2012) declares, "the "central fact" about autism with which we should probably start, is that we don't know very much about it at all" (p1). This chapter explores how the meaning of autism has shifted historically and the implications of such shifts for contemporary critical scholarship regarding autism, gender, and sexuality.

In order to engage with contemporary issues surrounding autism, a consideration of significant historical developments in the Anglo-American context proves necessary. As work by Waltz (2013) and Evans (2017) highlights, historically significant re-formulations of autism in diagnostic terms have primarily emerged from work produced in the UK and USA. The results of such work have subsequently influenced theoretical frameworks and public policy in other parts of the world. Recognising this historical context is therefore vital for understanding how contemporary framings of autism have emerged.

This chapter begins with a historical overview of autism's origins of as a diagnostic label and the subsequent changes in autism's diagnostic criteria over the course of the 20th century. In doing so, I draw upon popular scientific and academic accounts offered by Waltz, Silberman (2015), McGuire (2016), and Evans. Early psychoanalytical framings of autism concerned with inadequate parenting as a causal factor proved prevalent until the 1960s, before being replaced by alternative explanatory frameworks. Elements of such early accounts remain influential, however, informing "the pathology paradigm" (Walker, 2013, para1) which characterises autism in terms of problematic defects which prevent individuals from fully living their lives as normal, able-bodied/able-minded subjects.

Since the 1960s, with changes in diagnostic criteria called for by researchers such as Lorna Wing and others coming to institutional prominence in the ICD and DSM, other influential accounts regarding the causes and characteristics of autism have emerged over the course of recent decades (Evans, 2017). The “theory of mind” (Yergeau, 2013, para8) and “extreme male brain” (Baron-Cohen, 2004, p7) approaches, closely associated with the work of psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen (1999, 2004), offer notable examples of such approaches. Such theories examine the nature of autistic people’s minds, namely what makes them different to those of non-autistic people, in order to understand the causes of autistic impairments. Both theories have proven influential upon scientific research and popular consciousness regarding autism (Milton, 2012b; Jack, 2014; McGuire, 2016; Evans, 2017). At the same time, such framings have received critiques from autistic people themselves (Milton, 2012a; Yergeau, 2013; McGrath, 2017).

Having detailed this historical context, the chapter turns to an exploration of the theoretical and activist work of neurodiversity. Such work has emerged in response to dominant accounts of autism as a disorder, offering an alternative vision of autism which values difference and promotes autistic self-advocacy. Alongside providing a historical account of neurodiversity as a perspective and movement, the chapter considers work by prominent neurodiversity activists and scholars such as Jim Sinclair (2012), Nick Walker (2013, 2014, 2015), and Damian Milton (2012a, 2012b). Building upon this work, I outline my own theoretical perspectives regarding autism that inform my approach to the materials discussed throughout the thesis. I argue that autism should be understood in terms of a socially-situated aspect of personal identity connected to gender and sexuality. In turn, I argue that challenging disablist framings of autism helps to develop alternative, non-pathologising accounts of how autism is lived by individuals. Additionally, such work supports critiques of the social barriers which disable autistic people. In doing so, I suggest that a neurodiversity-influenced account of autism which considers the interrelationships of disability, gender, and sexuality enables critical analysis of representations of autistic people in the contemporary moment.

From Schizophrenia To Autism-Early 20th Century

The origins of autism as a category are found in early 20th century psychiatry, with the formulation of "the first autism" (Evans, 2017, p33). The concept of autism emerged from the wider research into schizophrenia carried out by the influential Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, with his first published use of the term occurring in 1911. Bleuler (1950) argued that schizophrenia was "characterized by a very peculiar alteration of the relation between the patient's inner life and the external world," using the term autism to refer to the way in which, for schizophrenics, "the inner life assumes pathological predominance" (p63). Autism emerged as a term for understanding "the most severe schizophrenics" who "cut themselves off as much as possible from any contact with the external world" (ibid). Under Bleuler's framework, autism was equated with "detachment from reality, together with the relative and absolute predominance of the inner life" (ibid). Autistic behaviour involved "illusions and...hallucinations" (p66), as schizophrenics struggled to engage with reality.

The Swiss child psychologist Jean Piaget would subsequently synthesise Bleuler's work with Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious to produce an account of early childhood development in which autism formed a key stage (Evans, 2017). According to Piaget, as a child grows and "attempts to engage with reality" (p44) they initially experience an autistic state as part of their development. As Evans highlights, this work would come to inform psychoanalytical thought and clinical practice regarding autism in both the UK and USA over subsequent decades.

Parental Problems-Mid 20th Century

By the mid-20th century a broad consensus regarding the causes and characteristics of autism as a childhood disorder had been established by various practitioners working within the fields of Anglo-American psychoanalysis and psychiatry (Nadesan, 2005). British psychiatrists, child psychologists, and object relations psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein played a key role in the development of such a consensus through their practice at child guidance clinics and institutions such as the Tavistock Institute (Waltz, 2013; Evans, 2017). For such practitioners, autism formed part of “early infantile hallucinatory thinking” (Evans, 2017, p56). Infants who proved unable to establish a healthy engagement with reality and develop past this early stage were, according to this framework, at risk of conditions such as “childhood schizophrenia” (ibid). This framing of a child’s failure to engage with reality as a cause of subsequent psychological difficulties was accompanied by an emphasis in such work on the role of familial relationships, particularly maternal relations, in ensuring healthy childhood development. The notion that maternal affection was integral for guaranteeing childhood well-being, Evan argues, would become central to post-Second World War British welfare policy with the emergence of “Bowlbyism” (p115), named after the attachment theorist John Bowlby. In public policy terms, Bowlbyism involved efforts to prevent “maternal deprivation” (p116) in children by incentivising mothers to remain within the domestic sphere and function as caregivers. In addition, as Evans notes, popular books and radio transmissions by psychoanalysts such as Bowlby and Donald Winnicott promoted the connection between maternal care and childhood well-being throughout the public sphere. Such media thereby promoted a general understanding of autism and associated conditions as the negative consequences of inadequate parenting

Similar developments regarding the framing of autism as a product of familial relationships occurred in the USA during the same period. In 1943 Austrian-American psychiatrist Leo Kanner published a collection of case studies of children who displayed abnormal behaviours, including repetitive speech and action, and considerable self-absorption. Kanner described such cases in terms of “Autistic Disturbances” (Waltz, 2013, p52), suggesting that such behaviours were evidence of a syndrome distinct from schizophrenia which potentially had an innate biological cause. At the same time, Kanner’s detailed commentary regarding the personalities and lifestyles of his patients’ parents further contributed to the Anglo-American consensus that the emergence of such an autistic condition could be located in familial contexts (Waltz, 2013; Silberman, 2015; Evans, 2017).

In subsequent decades, work by the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim (1967) came to play a key role in shaping popular understandings of autism in the post-war USA (Nadesan, 2005; Silverman, 2012; Waltz, 2013; Jack, 2014; Silberman, 2015; McGuire, 2016). Building upon Kanner's work, Bettelheim understood autistic people as "human beings who retained into a considerably older age" the "mode of perception" (1967, p4) found in young children. For Bettelheim, the psycho-emotional state of the autistic children he studied resembled that of concentration camp detainees who he had encountered during the Second World War, individuals who psychologically withdrew from engaging with external reality (Silberman, 2015). Echoing the analysis of post-war British psychoanalysts, Bettelheim's framework presented autism as the consequence of inadequate parenting, suggesting that the early relationships between "cold emotionless mothers" (Jack, 2014, p33) and their children played a key role in children developing autistic behaviours. This framework came to be associated with the concept of "Refrigerator Mothers" (Waltz, 2013, p73), a term not used by Bettelheim himself, which suggested that autism in children was caused by emotionally detached mothers. Such mothers were, under Bettelheim's paradigm, usually understood as being white and engaged in professional employment outside of the domestic sphere. Such a framing would inform perceptions of autism as a condition affecting the children of the white middle class.

Bettelheim's framework became highly influential in the USA through publications such as his best-selling *The Empty Fortress* (1967) in which he outlined the nature and causes of autism in children for a mass audience (Silverman, 2012). Psychoanalytical treatment, he suggested, offered a means of curing autistic behaviours and restoring normality to such children. He himself claimed to have successfully treated several child patients under his supervision. Following his death in 1990, many of Bettelheim's claims regarding the curing of autistic patients were found to be fraudulent in nature and that in reality he had inflicted considerable abuse upon them (Waltz, 2013; Silberman, 2015).

Observations on the First Autism and Its Legacies

The dominant accounts of autism developed in the Anglo-American sphere during the period described so far can be clearly seen as problematic in nature. Accounts produced by practitioners such as Klein, Kanner, and Bettelheim constructed autism in primarily pathologising terms. Autism was portrayed as a disorder which afflicted children, one caused by inadequate parental relationships. As Evans, Jack, and McGuire note, this form of parent blaming, particularly mother blaming, received credibility within the USA and UK at a time when post-war policy makers were re-asserting gendered roles and divisions of labour by encouraging mothers to remain in the domestic sphere. In this way, psychoanalytical framings positioned autism as the product of gendered failure on the part of mothers, with "maternal acts and attitudes" coming "under increasing scrutiny" (Nadesan, 2005, p86) during this period. Cases of autism in children offered evidence of the perils of absent or inadequate maternalism, with children condemned to an autistic state on account of inadequate child-mother relationships. The figures of the absent mother and insufficiently warm mother, mothers who failed to adhere to gendered expectations, were blamed for producing dysfunctional offspring.

Since the mid-20th century, such psychoanalytical accounts of autism have been superseded in the scientific mainstream by alternative psychological and biomedical framings, as discussed later in this chapter. I argue, however, that it is important to recognise that certain elements present in psychoanalytical frameworks regarding autism are also found within contemporary representations. In particular, informed by analysis discussed in Chapter 2, I would draw attention to the role of the figure of the Child in relation to autism. In the accounts of those such as Klein and Bettelheim, autism is positioned as an infantile state which certain individuals have remained abnormally entrapped within. As McGuire notes, "the West has a long history of infantilising the disabled subject" (2016, p118), with psychoanalytical framings of autism offering an explicit example of such phenomena. Autism's framing as a developmental disorder has come to portray autistic children as falling behind their peers as they grow older and has meant that the experiences and needs of autistic adults have historically been marginalised (McGrath, 2017). Parents may no longer be held directly responsible for causing autism in their children, but the figure of the autistic child is nevertheless positioned as one that should trouble them. Campaigns by organisations such as the USA-based charity Autism Speaks, which depict autism as a hostile intrusion upon childhood and family life, offer notable examples of the persistent stigmatisation of autistic children (McGuire, 2016). Children are portrayed as under threat from autism, with such organisations demanding biomedical interventions in order to eliminate this apparent threat.

Psychoanalytical frameworks pathologised autism and such pathologisation remains a significant element of contemporary popular accounts in scientific research and popular culture, even as new understandings of autism as a developmental condition have shaped the DSM and ICD diagnostic criteria. Autistic behaviours, whether they be apparent withdrawal from external environments or repetitive speech, were deemed problematic under such frameworks, requiring interventions where parental guidance had failed. As historical accounts have noted, efforts by Bettelheim and others to cure autism failed in practice, with professionals instead frequently mistreating their patients. The psychoanalytical paradigm may no longer dominate, but such an emphasis upon curing autism in children continues in other forms, with treatments such as applied behavioural analysis seeking to remove autistic behaviours (Milton and Moon, 2012; McGuire, 2016; Yergeau, 2018).

In these ways, framings of autism produced in the early-mid 20th century inaugurated an understanding of autism a problem in need of remedying, an understanding still present within contemporary framings. Such framings, I argue, are manifestations of the curative imaginary described by Kafer (2013) in Chapter 2 of this thesis, which encourages parents to monitor their children and “identify potential signs of pathology” (McGuire, 2016, p54). These framings, in turn, influence neuroscientific research which understands autism as a personal tragedy for young children that should be identified and remedied (Fitzgerald, 2017; Milton, 2018). As McGuire notes, forms of surveillance have shifted from the figure of the defective mother held responsible for the autistic child towards a primary focus on the autistic child itself. The pathologisation of autism, and with it socially disabling effects enacted against autistic people, may have changed in certain respects, but it is clear that historical psychoanalytical accounts remain influential in the contemporary period.

New Paths-Late 20th Century

The Anglo-American psychoanalytical consensus regarding autism would disintegrate from the 1960s onwards. Deinstitutionalisation of asylums and associated institutions meant that individuals who had previously been diagnosed as mentally defective required alternative forms of support, whilst new epidemiological studies into autism rates revealed greater numbers of autistic people amongst populations than had previously been assumed (Eyal et al., 2010; Evans, 2017). Such developments were accompanied by the formation of parental advocacy movements who rejected dominant accounts blaming them for their children's autism and demanded improved service provision for their families (Silberman, 2015; Evans, 2017). Scientific researchers turned their attention towards potential neurological causes for autism (Fitzgerald, 2017), with this shift towards studying the neurological origins of autism occurring against a backdrop of wider developments in the domains of biomedicine and neuroscience in the latter part of the 20th century (Clarke et al., 2003; Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013). At the same time, clinicians developed alternative therapeutic approaches for treating autism, such as the influential behaviourist approach of Norwegian-American psychologist Ole Aver Lovaas (Milton and Moon, 2012; Silberman, 2015; Yergeau, 2018). All these developments worked to undermine the dominant psychoanalytical consensus regarding the causes and treatment of autism (Evans, 2017).

Perhaps the most significant development to occur during this period was a major reconceptualisation of autism in diagnostic terms developed by the British epidemiologist Lorna Wing, who produced an alternative understanding of autism based on the 1940s research of Austrian paediatrician Hans Asperger (Waltz, 2013; Silberman, 2015; Evans, 2017). Wing's work understood autism in terms of "a Triad of Impairments" (Arnold, 2012, p2), namely impairments in regard to social interaction, communication, and imagination. Under such a diagnostic criteria, “lack of interaction…use of gesture, semantic understanding etc.…and resistance to change indulgence in repetitive and stereotypical behaviour” (ibid) were regarded as symptoms of an individual’s autism, offering a means by which professionals could observe and classify children.

Furthermore, Wing’s work formulated autism in terms of a spectrum, drawing upon Han Asperger’s work with impaired children in the 1940s. Despite the differences between the children described in Asperger’s and Kanner’s respective case studies, Wing saw both sets of children as simply occupying different points on a continuous spectrum of conditions, as opposed to them possessing distinct disorders (Evans, 2017). In this respect, children who in the past may have received distinct diagnoses, such as childhood schizophrenia and mental defection, could now be categorised under a shared broad label of autism.

Over the course of the late 20th century, Wing’s triad-based diagnostic criteria came to receive institutional status within DSM and ICD. In DSM III R and DSM IV the triad of impairments model became the basis for diagnosing autism, with DSM IV placing autism as a category alongside other related developmental conditions such as Asperger Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder (Not Otherwise Specified) (Evans, 2017). During the 2010s, these categories were re-designed in DSM V, with the removal of Asperger syndrome as a separate category and the fusion of “the “social” and “communication” aspects” (p417) of the previous triad producing the diagnostic criteria described in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

Mindblindness and the Extreme Male Brain-21st Century Autism

As Milton (2012a) notes, “in recent decades there has been much debate over the ontological status of autism and other neurological “disorders,” with such theorisation of the nature and causes of autism situated “primarily within the field of cognitive neuroscience and psychological paradigms” (p883). Two of the most notable approaches to emerge from such debates, ones which have proven particularly influential upon wider understandings of autism, are the framings of mindblindness and the extreme male brain.

In Baron-Cohen's account of mindblindness, influenced by the work of Anglo-German psychologist Uta Frith (Evans, 2017), human beings have developed the "remarkable ability" (Baron-Cohen, 1999, p7) to envisage and understand other people's mental processes, thereby enabling humans to predict the actions of others and to engage in successful communication. Autistic people, according to this account, "fail to develop this capacity" (ibid) and therefore prove to be "mindblind" (p4) as they develop. As a result, Baron-Cohen suggests "that children and adults with the biological condition of autism suffer, to varying degrees, from mindblindess" (p5). Under this framework, autism is defined primarily in terms of "a core deficit" (p4), as those who are autistic struggle to comprehend the thoughts of non-autistic people and find it difficult to understand verbal and non-verbal cues. For Baron-Cohen, this explains why autistic people appear "socially as...odd...often "lacking in empathy"" in the eyes of "their peers" (p136). Such an account therefore suggests that autistic people are unable to "understand that other people have their own unique mental states, lives and experiences" (Yergeau, 2013, para8).

Building upon this research into mindblindness, Baron-Cohen's research produced the framing of autism as a manifestation of an extreme male brain type. In his book *The Essential Difference* (2004) Baron-Cohen offers an account of the psychology of "sex differences" (p9). According to Baron-Cohen, "essential differences between the male and female mind" (pxi) are the consequences of evolutionary development and biological processes, with distinct brain types having emerged relating to "systemising and empathising skills" (p6). Based upon statistical averages gathered through research, he argues that the capacity to empathise is mainly possessed by women, whereas men are on average more skilled at systemising, defined as "the drive to analyse, explore and construct a system" (p3). As a result, empathising is associated with "the female brain" type, whilst "the male brain" (p6) type is defined by systemising. Baron-Cohen claims that this does not meant that all men have systemic brains and that all women have empathetic brains, but that these are nevertheless statistical averages. Women tend to be better at empathising than men and men tend to systemitise more than women, and this, Baron-Cohen suggests, explains the different preoccupations and behaviours of the two genders. Baron-Cohen acknowledges that cultural factors undoubtedly shape such gendered behaviours, but argues that gendered tendencies towards empathy and systemising are fundamentally rooted in universal biology rather than social structures or cultural norms.

Having established such a framework for understanding gender, Baron-Cohen argues that autism is a manifestation of an extreme tendency towards systemising thinking, one which is accompanied by reduced empathetic thinking. As Baron-Cohen puts it, "individuals with the extreme male brain…may be talented systemizers but at the same they may be "mindblind"" (p7), with autistic people fitting into such a category. In this way, the framing builds upon his earlier claim that autistic people experience difficulties in mindreading and empathising with others. Baron-Cohen genders such difficulties as being inherently masculine, treating autistic people's obsessional behaviours as evidence of their systemising thinking. He illustrates his argument by discussing the lives of historical figures such as the physicists Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein who he argues possessed "high systemising skills but also rather low empathizing skills" (p167). Such figures, he suggests, demonstrate how autistic people can thrive in the fields of science and technology which heavily rely upon participants engaging in systemising thinking. In this way, as Jack puts it, Baron-Cohen's theory proposes that "autism is an augmented example of the typical male brain, a brain preoccupied with technology, systems, and classifications to the exclusion of social and emotional concerns" (2014, p121). Baron-Cohen does not see such claims, which position men and women as inherently different, as contrary to achieving gender equality in society. Despite this, such work has attracted criticism from feminist scientific researchers who argue that his theories promote biological determinism in a way which legitimises gendered inequality (Fine, 2010; Rippon, 2019).

Neurodiversity-A New Paradigm

Emerging in opposition to the ways in which non-autistic experts and organisations, ranging from psychologists and medical researchers to parental advocates, have historically dominated discussions and public action surrounding autism, perspectives associated with the neurodiversity movement have arisen which offer alternative means of understanding autism (McWade, Milton, and Beresford, 2015; Graby, 2015; Silberman, 2015; Evans, 2017). Such understandings, in turn, are closely related to the politics of autistic self-advocacy, with autistic people who subscribe to the movement's perspectives working to enact social change to improve autistic people's lives in the face of structural disablism.

Neurodiversity, as prominent advocate Nick Walker (2014) notes, is used to refer to "the diversity of human brains and minds-the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species" (para6). Based upon this recognition, scholars and activists such as Walker have developed "the neurodiversity paradigm," a theoretical perspective which suggests that "neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity" (ibid). From such a perspective, the notion "that there is one "normal" or "healthy" type of brain or mind" is critiqued as "a culturally constructed fiction" (ibid), with autism and other nominal disorders instead understood as part of "a natural variation among humans" (Jaarsma and Welin, 2012, p21). In place of notions of "neurological deficit" (O'Dell et al., 2016, p172), biomedical and neuroscientific notions which negatively depict those categorised with mental and neurodevelopmental disorders, the neurodiversity movement regards "all humans as beings with embodied differences" (McWade, Milton, and Beresford, 2015, p306). Rather than requiring cures, proponents of the neurodiversity paradigm argue that such "natural differences" are ones "which should be accepted and accommodated" (Graby, 2015, p233) within society. Neurodiversity advocates hope to undermine today's dominant pathology paradigm, one which marginalises autistic people and others (Walker, 2013). These advocates instead struggle for "a more ecological view of society…one that is more relaxed about different styles of being" (Singer, 1997, p67). In this way, the neurodiversity paradigm opposes the curative perspectives associated with medical interventions, such as "applied behaviour analysis" (Yergeau, 2018, p93), and autism advocacy organisations such as the USA-based Autism Speaks described earlier. Whereas such perspectives represent autism as an intrinsically negative condition, suggesting that resources should be concentrated on discovering the causes of autism and developing medical cures, neurodiversity as a paradigm encourages acceptance of autism as an everyday fact and for resources to instead be committed to better supporting autistic people. Neurodiversity activism, in this way, seeks to change society to more hospitable for autistic and other neurodivergent people.

History of a Term, History of a Movement

The term neurodiversity first came into popular use in the 1990s, with Judy Singer the first major proponent of the term (Singer, 1997), although her engagements with online neurodivergent communities meant the term was already in circulation before she published her work in an academic format (Graby, 2015). Influenced by family circumstances relating to autism, including her own diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome, and her theoretical engagements with the social model of disability, as described in Chapter 2, Singer became involved in the emergence of "a politics of neurological diversity, or neurodiversity" (1997, p64). Singer associates such a politics with the emergence of the autistic spectrum noted earlier. For Singer, the formation of the spectrum model was shaped both by organised parental resistance to the refrigerator mother framework and the reclaiming of diagnostic labels as identities by "people with "marginal" neurological differences" (p65). The development of the Internet is regarded by Singer as a significant factor in having shaped autistic people's everyday lives, providing a means through which autistic people have been able "to have the communication they desire, whilst protecting them from the overwhelming sensory overload of human presence" (ibid). In Singer's view, such technological developments potentially promise "an era of co-evolution with machines that opens up a new ecological niche for people "on the spectrum", allowing them/us to flourish and come out with pride" (p66). The proliferation of online autistic communities in recent decades would appear to offer evidence for such a vision coming to fruition (Hacking, 2010; Jack, 2014; Silberman, 2015).

As an organised movement, neurodiversity signifies “the struggle for the civil rights of all those diagnosed with neurological or neurodevelopmental disorders” (Jaarsma and Welin, 2012, p21), with the movement encompassing “people with a variety of diagnostic labels (such as autistic spectrum conditions, dyslexia, dyspraxia and AD(H)D)” (Graby, 2015, p232). Such people can collectively be understood as being neurodivergent, living outside the “neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal”” (ibid). The movement has struggled to make “visible power structures” (O’Dell et al., 2016, p172) that naturalise being “neurotypical” (Walker, 2013, para10) as a normative state, that is not living with a ‘disorder’ such as autism. Such normalisation pathologises and marginalises neurodivergent people. In this way, the neurodiversity movement not only struggles to improve autistic people’s lives, but challenges societal disablism which impacts a wide range of marginalised groups.

As Singer and Graby suggest, the neurodiversity movement can be understood as an outgrowth of other social movements engaging with matters of disability and mental health. Graby, for example, suggests that there are continuities between neurodiversity activism and the post-1970s disabled people’s movement considered in the previous chapter of this thesis. As noted in Chapter 2, although initially started by people with physical impairments, over time the movement came to encompass those with non-physical impairments, with Graby highlighting connections between disabled people’s struggles and the struggles of those classified as being mentally ill. Autistic people, he suggests, struggle under this wider banner of disability politics. In a similar manner, Graby argues that the mental health survivors’ movement which emerged in the latter part of the 20th century offers a prefiguration of the forms of self-advocacy engaged in by neurodivergent communities today.

In a similar manner, Singer highlights parallels between the politics of neurodiversity and aspects of the Deaf movement. Deaf people, she argues, have historically struggled to constitute themselves as politicised communities due to the isolation of its members. Autistic people, Singer suggests, have faced a similar challenge. Over recent decades, however, both groups have been able to develop forms of organised self-advocacy, partially as a result of the expansion of the Internet enabling the formation of online communities.

The neurodiversity movement's emergence can also be understood, Graby suggests, as a "response to the growth of a parent-dominated "autism advocacy" lobby" (2015, p232) focused on the "search for a "cure" for autism" (ibid). As suggested earlier, parental advocacy groups may have resisted the stigmatisation of the psychoanalytical paradigm, but in reproducing the curative imaginary of the psychiatric professions they nevertheless pathologised autism, thereby marginalising autistic people. In the face of non-autistic people dominating advocacy efforts, some autistic self-advocates such as Jim Sinclair began to organise online and offline, with the establishment of Autscape as a safe space for autistic people to meet and engage with their issues free of the interference of parental advocates a major development in the growth of such self-advocacy over the course of the 1990s (Silberman, 2015).

Mourning

Sinclair's text *Don't Mourn for Us* offers one of the neurodiversity movement's most notable theoretical interventions (Sinclair, 2012). In this text, originally devised as a talk in the early 1990s (Silberman, 2015), Sinclair responds to the claim advanced by parents of autistic children that discovering their children's autism "was the most traumatic thing that ever happened to them" (2012, p1). For Sinclair, such grief is not the product of "the child's autism in itself" but rather emerges from "the loss of the normal child the parents had hoped and expected to have" (ibid). Sinclair argues that treating "the child's autism as a source of grief" proves harmful for both neurotypical parents and autistic children and urges "parents to make radical changes in their perceptions of what autism means" (ibid). Rather than an affliction affecting an otherwise "normal" child, a pathologising understanding promoted by medical professionals and parental activists, autism should instead be accepted as constitutive of a child's personal identity. Non-autistic parents may characterise their autistic children as being non-responsive to normative forms of human communication and interaction, but Sinclair suggests that they should instead recognise that autistic people have a different form of language. If parents really do value their children, Sinclair suggests, then they should be willing to accommodate this fact. In turn, Sinclair argues that organisations concerned with autism should not be focused upon engaging with the “shattered expectations” (p3) of parents caused by the apparent tragedy of autism, but should instead be focused upon addressing the tragedy that the current world “has no place” (ibid) for autistic people.

In advancing such arguments, Sinclair articulates what has become a key aspect of the critical perspective associated with neurodiversity, namely the view that rather than autism being understood as an intrinsic problem, it is contemporary society which should be critiqued and transformed. Current social norms regarding communication and interaction, for example, are portrayed as discriminating against neurodivergent people. In this way, the neurodiversity movement can be seen to echo elements of the social model of disability discussed in the previous chapter, with self-advocacy intended to challenge and change oppressive social environments which disable autistic and other neurodivergent people.

Neurodiversity Groups

The USA-based Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) offers a notable example of a group rooted in the critical perspective of neurodiversity (ASAN, 2020). ASAN seeks to challenge disablist discrimination and open up educational and employment opportunities for autistic people. The organisation’s online “Position Statements” (para1) states that ASAN supports “the ideas of the neurodiversity movement” and calls for autistic people’s differences to be “celebrated” (para3). Explicitly drawing upon the social model of disability, ASAN argues that “society is the problem when it does not accommodate people with disabilities” suggesting that “instead of trying to change disabled people” (para4) advocacy must focus on allowing disabled people to have access to material support.

Similarly, several neurodiversity and autistic self-advocate groups have emerged in the UK since the early 2000s. The group Autistic UK (2020), for example, promotes “peer to peer support and inclusion" (para1), arguing that "there should be nothing about us without us" (para2) when it comes to advocacy for autistic people. In 2016, a group of activists working within the UK Labour Party produced a manifesto focused on neurodiversity (Neurodiversity Manifesto, 2016, Craine, 2020). The manifesto declares that the authors want "human neurodiversity to be accepted not suppressed or cured" (Neurodiversity Manifesto, 2016, para3), detailing policies intended to "bring about the kind of structural changes needed to create a more ND inclusive society" (Craine, 2020, p27). The manifesto calls for measures to challenge disablist oppression affecting neurodivergent people, such as greater support for neurodivergent people facing workplace discrimination.

Mindblindness and Double Empathy

A major object of critique in recent neurodiversity scholarship has been the mindblindness framing of autism noted earlier in this chapter. In framing autism as the consequence of an inability to empathise with other people, neurodivergent critics argue that the theory of mindblindness characterises autistic people purely in terms of their deficits (Milton, 2012a; Yergeau, 2013). Autistic people are defined by deficits in relation to other people, rather than in terms of difference as favoured by neurodiversity proponents. As highlighted by Yergeau, the mindblindness framing treats autistic people in terms of the boundary between the categories of the human and non-human. In positioning mindreading as a defining human characteristic, the framing implies that autistic people who apparently lack such an ability are non-human. Yergeau starkly expresses where such thought leads: "Humans are humans because they possess a theory of mind, and autistics are inhuman because they do not" (2013, para10).

Milton (2012a) similarly challenges the mindblindness framing of autism, offering in its place a consideration of the "double empathy problem" (p884) regarding autism. Milton defines this problem in terms of "a disjuncture in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors which becomes more marked the wider the disjuncture in dispositional perceptions of the lifeworld" (ibid). Whilst non-autistic people experience this disjuncture "as a breach in the "natural attitude" of what constitutes "social reality"" (ibid), autistic people experience it as "everyday and often traumatic" (ibid) in nature. Instead of locating "the difficulties faced by autistic people solely within the brains/minds of "the autistic person"" (Milton, 2012b, p10), the framework focuses on the social world which autistic people encounter, one which is determined by neurotypical people. In this light, rather than seeing autism in the problematic terms of Baron-Cohen's framings, Milton's work suggests that it is possible to reconceptualise autism as a socially influenced embodied state of being. From this perspective, the issues faced by autistic people, for example, in regards to communicating with others, are seen as more than just the inevitable result of biological defects. They are instead understood as the consequences of social contexts which can be changed. Milton's work makes it possible to understand autistic people's experiences in terms which are not primarily psychological or biomedical in nature, drawing attention to the ways in which autistic people's impairments around communication and interaction are affected by social environments.

Neuroqueer

Another recent development in neurodiversity theoretical work which proves particularly relevant to this thesis is the emergence of "neuroqueer" (Walker, 2015, para1) work. Developed by writers and activists such as Yergeau (2018) and Walker during the 2010s, neuroqueer work examines the intersections of neurodivergence and queerness, analysing the ways in which critical approaches and practices of "neuroqueering" (ibid) can be developed. In doing so, neuroqueer scholars and activists draw upon queer theory's conception of queerness as a troubling and contesting of established social norms. As Walker puts it:

> *Neuroqueer* is both a verb and an adjective. As a verb, it refers to a broad range of interrelated practices. As an adjective it describes things that are associated with those practices or that result from those practices: neuroqueer theory, neuroqueer perspectives, neuroqueer narratives, neuroqueer literature, neuroqueer art,

> neuroqueer culture, neuroqueer community. And as an adjective, *neuroqueer* can also serve as a label of social identity, just like such labels as *queer, gay, lesbian, straight, black, white, hapa, Deaf,* or *Autistic* (to name just a small sampling).
>
> (2015, para10) (italicised in original).

In Walker's view, a wide range of practices can be understood as being neuroqueer in nature. Such neuroqueer practices include "being both neurodivergent and queer" (para15), "engaging in practices intended to "undo" one's cultural condition toward conformity and compliance with dominant norms" (para18), and producing or critiquing "literature and/or other cultural artifacts" (para20) focused on neurodivergence.

The neuroqueer framework explicitly draws attention to connections between neurodivergent and LGBTQ communities. Both communities have historically experienced persecution on account of their non-normativity, as previously highlighted in Chapter 2, with people who identify as members of both groups facing particular forms of oppression. Neuroqueer work provides this thesis with a critical theoretical standpoint which informs my approach to texts focused on neurodivergence and queerness, one which recognises the intersections of autism and sexuality in people's experiences and acknowledges possibilities for resistance to dominant norms on the part of autistic people.

What is Autism To Me?

Reflecting upon the historical developments and theoretical materials presented in this chapter, I now turn to outlining my own position regarding the nature of autism and how such a position informs the work of this thesis. I strongly identify with the neurodiversity paradigm and the theoretical work associated with it, with a conscious and consistent theme in my work being to critique and resist the pathologising elements present in contemporary representations of autistic life. Such elements have historically been promoted by non-autistic people positioning themselves as experts, whether this be psychoanalysts, medical professionals or parental advocates, with autistic people's own voices frequently marginalised or granted limited recognition. Such marginalisation has, in turn, legitimised the pathologisation of autism. Representations ranging from autism as the schizophrenia of poorly raised children to autism as an inhuman inability to empathise have negatively shaped popular discourses and public discussions. Drawing upon neurodivergent scholarship in order to articulate my own critical perspectives regarding various texts focused on autistic people, particularly the interrelationship of disability, gender, and sexuality in people's lives, I challenge such negative representations. In turn, I draw out more positive aspects of these texts which can develop accounts of autistic people's experiences which are more conducive to supporting autistic people's well-being and emancipatory politics.

Building upon the existing work of neurodiversity scholars, I personally view autism as "a way of being" (Sinclair, 2012, p1) which is defined by differences rather than deficits. Autism, from my standpoint as an autistic scholar, is an integral aspect of personal identity. At the same time, personal experiences of autism are embodied within social and cultural contexts, as opposed to being an ahistorical biological aspect of a person's self. As Milton's double empathy problem clearly demonstrates, impairments in communication and social interaction are not simply the by-products of biological deficits, as suggested by theories such as that of mindblindness, but are relational in nature. Social norms developed by non-autistic people are ones which disable autistic people's capacities and create difficulties for autistic people to engage with non-autistic people, with the latter group coming to see the former as being deviant or defective. As McGrath argues, "it takes *two* people to render autism present in one" (2017, p12) (italicised in original), as non-autistic observers socially position autistic people in particular ways, ways which often prove to be disabling.

Pathologising accounts of autism, I argue, are ones which have profoundly harmful consequences for autistic people's lives in contemporary society. These depictions produce and reproduce curative and rehabilitative perspectives regarding autistic people's differences, echoing the wider oppression of disabled people which has historically been highlighted and challenged by disability scholars and activists. As Murray puts it in his critical engagement with popular discourses surrounding autism:

> If it becomes foundational to conceive of autism as an abnormality then not only does it appear rational that the condition is one that requires "correction," it also makes the idea of "everyday autism," the daily business of a life lived being autistic, one that is difficult for any individual to sustain or justify.
>
> (2012, p16)

The pathology paradigm remains an ever present issue for autistic people, with autism portrayed as a problem for parents, medical experts, and society as a whole (Walker, 2013). Influential framings present autism in terms of biological disorder and the “personal tragedy theory of disability” (Oliver, 1990, p1) long critiqued by disability activists, as autistic people are primarily defined in terms of what they do not possess compared to those who are seen as neurotypical. Pathologising representations, in turn, legitimise considerable disablist violence in today’s world, with numerous cases over recent decades of parents and carers in the USA and Canada murdering their autistic children on the explicit grounds of an inability to accept their children’s autism offering clear evidence of the horrific consequences of pathologisation (McGuire, 2016). More subtly, these characterisations of autism often have negative effects upon the psycho-emotional well-being of autistic people. As Milton (Milton and Moon, 2012) suggests, such framings influence efforts to render autistic people more ‘normal’ through therapeutic interventions. These interventions, reflecting curative perspectives in society, frequently damage autistic people’s senses of self and cause them to suffer mental and emotional distress. I agree with Milton that such harm amounts to psycho-emotional disablement of the sort described by Thomas (1999) in the previous chapter. Autistic people come to internalise such disabling oppression, with the practice of “masking,” in which autistic people attempt to disguise their autistic behaviours, often causing severe psychological harm (Hull et al., 2017; Cook, Ogden and Winstone, 2018).

In advancing this argument, I do not characterise all biomedical or psychological engagement with autism as being inherently harmful in nature or deny that some autistic people face difficulties they may themselves regard as biological in nature. Reductively treating all autistic people's problems as the result of oppressive social forces risks engaging in a crude form of social constructionism which overlooks the complexities of autistic people's lived experiences. Autistic people can face issues that appear biologically-determined, for example, sensory issues, and for some autistic people forms of therapeutic support may prove beneficial in their own lives. To reductively reduce these issues to purely external negative social forces would be unhelpful. At the same time, approaching autism through a purely biomedical lens, thereby uncritically echoing the diagnostic criteria of the DSM and ICD and the rhetoric of professional services and parental lobbyists, proves flawed. Such an approach reproduces pathologisation, treating autism as a disembodied biological entity and failing to consider the role of social environments in shaping autistic people's experiences. It is important to, as the neurodiversity paradigm encourages, focus upon developing an understanding of autism in terms of difference and to value that difference despite contemporary social oppression. Efforts to support potential difficulties that some autistic people may face or want remedying, in this respect, should be consciously detached from medicalised approaches which treat autistic people as defective and which echo the disablist terms of the curative imaginary described by Kafer in Chapter 2.

In making such an identification with the neurodiversity paradigm in my own work, I recognise that it is important to acknowledge that not all autistic people identify with neurodiversity perspectives. As Russell (2020) highlights, there have been complaints from some autistic people "that the movement is made up mostly of less impaired individuals who do not recognise people with more severe problems" (p293). For such autistic critics, their lives would be improved by biomedical treatments and they would therefore accept what I and other neurodiversity scholars characterise as a pathologising account of autism. In advancing my own neurodiversity influenced position, I do not want to simply denigrate the experiences of people who have struggled with being autistic and who are therefore sympathetic to curative perspectives. Nevertheless, I argue that social changes informed by the neurodiversity paradigm would help to address many difficulties which are faced by autistic people in general, however impaired such people may perceive themselves as being as a result of their biological deficits. Challenging cultural representations of autistic people as inherently defective, for example, would in my view improve the lives of many autistic people, regardless of the severity of their difficulties around matters of communication and interaction. Such pathologising framings characterise autistic people in dehumanising terms and this dehumanisation should be challenged regardless of how autistic people themselves may feel about their impairments. Some autistic people have particular needs which other autistic people, including myself, do not share, but I would still argue that challenges to disablist oppression would benefit autistic people as a whole. It is possible, in my view, to recognise and work to meet people's particular needs without conceding to a purely pathologised framing of all autistic people as being defective on account of their impairments.

Relevance of Gender and Sexuality

As has been established in this chapter, understandings of autism have long been connected to gender in terms of roles, identities, and relationships. The period in which psychoanalytical perspectives dominated clinical thought and practice involved autism being seen as the by-product of poor mothering, with autism viewed as a disorder which could be prevented by improved maternal relationships guided by the insights of psychoanalytical expertise. In more recent decades, the work of Baron-Cohen has portrayed autism as an inherently masculine condition. This psychological framework conceptualises autism in terms of masculinity and suggests that autism reveals biological truths about gender more widely. Contemporary neurodiversity scholars and activists increasingly draw links between matters of autism, gender, and sexuality, often in ways which trouble more normative forms of sexuality and gender, as indicated by the development of neuroqueer perspectives and politics in recent years.

In my own work, I explore the relationships between gender, sexuality, and autism in people's lives life in regards to forms of representation present across various domains of cultural and social life. At a time when influential framings such as Baron-Cohen's are being questioned, for example, in relation to the historic bias towards boys over girls in autism's diagnostic criteria (Hill, 2012, 2016), I argue that critically exploring representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects is worth pursing as a project. Doing so can help to contest the more harmful elements of such representations and to develop more inclusive and sociological accounts. As an embodied aspect of personal identity, autism intersects with embodied experiences of gender and sexuality, with the historical association of autism with masculinity having particularly profound effects upon autistic people's lived experiences. Influential approaches to the interrelationship between autism and gender which have focused on extreme masculinity and gender normativity have caused certain groups to be marginalised. As Hill's articles highlight, autistic girls and women have historically been denied diagnoses, preventing them from accessing adequate service provision. Meanwhile, trans autistic people have had diagnoses of autism used to invalidate their personal identities and to dismiss their requests for medical support (Burns, 2017). Challenging more problematic aspects of popular framings of gender, sexuality, and autism, whilst simultaneously acknowledging other social developments, for example, the emergence of neurodiversity activist literature focused on autistic people's experiences of gender and sexuality, forms the basis of this research project. In this way, the work of this thesis builds upon the theoretical and activist work of neurodiversity and neuroqueer scholarship in the recent period. Such work is intended to contest disabling forces affecting autistic people of various genders and sexualities. In doing so, this work supports efforts to transform contemporary social life so that is it more accepting of neurodiversity. Social change of this nature would enable autistic and neurodivergent people to fully express their differences and have such differences recognised and valued by other members of society, producing the "more ecological view of society" (1997, p67) advocated for by Singer.

Concluding Remarks

As autism has become more publicly visible over the course of the last century, the category has historically undergone significant changes in terms of understanding, in part due to the work of autistic self-advocates and the neurodiversity movement in challenging the pathologisation of autistic people as suffering from a tragic disorder. Indeed, Baron-Cohen (2017) himself has expressed sympathy for the neurodiversity movement in recent years. Agreeing with the movement's challenge to pathologising representations of autistic people as being defective, he suggests that "we need more ethical, nonstigmatising language and concepts for thinking about people who are different" (p246). In addition, Baron-Cohen argues that more attention should be given to autistic people's capacities, as opposed to continuing to primarily focus on their apparent deficits.

Despite these changes, pathologising elements have clearly remained prevalent in accounts of autism since the early 20th century, from the refrigerator mother narrative of the past to contemporary mindblindness accounts. Such understandings of autism position those who are autistic as being in deficit in relation to 'normal' people, with repetitive speech, repetitive actions, and impairments in interaction and communication regarded as problematic in nature. The stigmatisation of autism as a label may have been reduced in certain respects over recent decades, but autism still continues to be characterised as a problematic condition throughout various discourses. Calls for cures and biomedical interventions are not uncommon, with even some autistic people advocating for autism to be cured .

Faced with such disabling conditions, the neurodiversity movement's insights prove valuable for analysing and contesting the social problems which affect autistic people. The neurodiversity paradigm highlights how autistic people may be different to those who are neurotypical, but this does not mean that they are defective. Such analysis makes clear how society is constituted by disabling norms which negatively impact the lives of neurodivergent people. The paradigm, in turn, opens up the possibility for overcoming such social oppression.

It is in this spirit that I analyse the representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects throughout this thesis. I argue that a critical engagement with such representations throughout various texts can draw attention to the social problems facing autistic people, such as the pathologisation of autistic gender and sexual non-conformity, and can highlight potential avenues for challenging disablist oppression in the contemporary moment. Such avenues can overcome the harmful elements of influential biomedical, psychological, and popular understandings of autistic people. These alternative approaches, in turn, point towards understandings of autistic people's experiences which reflect the neurodiversity paradigm's emphasis on accepting and valuing difference. In addition, such approaches can produce better understandings of the connections between autism, gender, and sexuality in people's lives than the normalising and essentialist discourses of those such as Baron-Cohen. I argue that these accounts, which prove to be more pluralistic and intersectional in nature, can help to improve the lives of autistic people who face forms of gendered and sexual oppression. In Chapter 4 I begin to apply the insights of such neurodiversity work to the first of my case studies, as I analyse a selection of texts, primarily self-help ones, which focus on autistic people's gendered and sexual experiences.

PART TWO:

CASE STUDIES

Chapter 4: Autism Within and Against Self-Help Literature

Introductory Remarks

As the public visibility of autism has grown over recent decades, greater numbers of texts have been produced which offer parents and carers advice on how best to support autistic people. During this period the UK-based Jessica Kingsley Publishers have become a notable producer of such educational and therapeutic texts (Jessica Kinsley Publishers, 2020). These texts, which take the form of self-help literature, provide readers with accessible knowledge about autistic people, drawing upon scientific research developed by psychologists such as Uta Frith (2003).

Over the course of this chapter, I explore some of the ways in which autistic people are represented in such texts. I do so by analysing a sample of scientific and therapeutic texts produced over the last two decades. Framings of the entanglements of autism, gender, and sexuality in people's lives within such texts, I argue, have consequences for autistic people's lived experiences. Such framings inform the attitudes and actions of non-autistic and autistic people in society. The effects of such framings appear particularly significant for autistic people who do not conform with gender and sexual norms, with such representations having the potential to pathologise or affirm these aspects of their lives as subjects.

In this chapter, I engage in a close reading of a selection of Anglosphere produced texts which focus on autism, sexuality, and gender. These texts are primarily drawn primarily from the genres of psychology and self-help, although I consider one text in the final section of the chapter which presents itself as a sociological critique of psychological accounts of autism. In analysing this sample, I explore how the authors of such texts represent gender, sexuality, and disability in autistic people's lives as they seek to inform readers about issues such as autistic people's capacities to engage in intimate relationships. I consider how such representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects can inform understandings of autistic people in society. In turn, I analyse the implications of such texts for autistic people, such as the ways in which the texts challenge or reinforce disablist oppression. I am also concerned with the ways in which such texts provide opportunities for autistic people's own voices to be heard and the possibilities that they offer for autistic self-advocacy.

Representations of autistic experience in these texts contain elements which prove both positive and negative for autistic people. Influenced by the work of neurodiversity scholars such as Walker (2013, 2014, 2015), Milton (2012a, 2012b), and Yergeau (2013) introduced in Chapter 3, I critically engage with the representations featured within these texts. In the process, I identify and contest elements which I argue prove disabling for autistic people. Elements which portray autistic people as inhuman on account of their impairments, or which depict autism as an essentially masculine condition in a way which marginalises autistic women and gender variant people's experiences, are harmful in my view. Such elements risk contributing to disablism against autistic people, who come to be seen as different and therefore deserving of discrimination. In turn, these elements can negatively impact more marginalised autistic people's access to forms of support. As highlighted in earlier chapters, the gendered representation of autism as a masculine condition has been held responsible for the historical underdiagnosis of autism in women and girls (Hill, 2012, 2016; McGrath, 2017). Such a phenomena clearly demonstrates the material consequences that cultural representations can have for autistic people's lives. As a result, critical examination of such representations forms a key component of the textual analysis carried out in this chapter. In my view, critiquing such representations contributes towards the neurodiversity movement's challenge to the oppression of autistic people, including autistic people who face additional forms of oppression on account of their gender and sexuality.

At the same time, I do not intend to purely critique all the texts featured in my sample. I actively avoid portraying them as being irredeemably flawed in terms of the framings of autistic people and approaches to autistic sexuality and gender that they offer. There are aspects in these texts which have potentially positive implications for autistic people. Framings of autistic experiences which avoid pathologising accounts of lives ruined by impairments, accounts which reproduce the medical and personal tragedy models of disability critiqued in Chapter 2, and which instead emphasise the importance of valuing autistic people for their differences, are to be welcomed in these texts. Engagements with more marginalised autistic people's experiences, such as the platforming of the voices of autistic women and autistic LGBTQ people, are also positive aspects in these texts. Such elements demonstrate the willingness of some writers and professionals to meaningfully engage with autistic people's diverse experiences of gender and sexuality.

As noted in Chapter 1, the analysis of my textual sample seeks to go beyond offering a narrow form of hostile critique of the sort questioned in postcritical scholarship (Latour, 2003; Sedgwick, 2003; Felski, 2015; Anker and Felski, 2017; Fitzgerald, 2017). As detailed earlier, social critique remains an integral aspect of my research project, but at the same time I draw attention to elements present in the texts contained within my textual sample which challenge harmful representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects.

Selection of Texts

My textual sample in this chapter is composed of a selection of texts produced primarily in the UK and USA for English speaking readers since 1990. As discussed in Chapter 3, influential work on autism within the fields of scientific research and public policy has emerged from the UK over the course of recent decades, with such work shaping developments in other national contexts throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Evans, 2017). At the same time, the last three decades have witnessed the emergence of the neurodiversity movement. As a result, I argue that an exploration of therapeutic texts produced and distributed in the UK during this period is worth pursuing. Framings featured in these texts regarding autistic gender and sexuality can have significant effects upon attitudes towards autistic people in clinical, professional, and intimate contexts throughout the UK. The UK's significant role in shaping autism research and policy, in turn, means that such texts also have global implications for autistic people's lives.

Some of the authors featured in the sample are autistic themselves or have received diagnoses of autism whilst personally rejecting the label. Other texts are authored by non-autistic professionals and researchers who study autism and work with autistic people in clinical contexts. The latter writers draw upon their professional research and experience to inform the perspectives and advice featured within their texts regarding issues in autistic people's lives.

The texts considered here are predominantly professional self-help resources. At the same time, the contents of these texts often mix genres together, with autistic people's autobiographical writings included in several of the self-help texts analysed here. Such self-help texts, I suggest, are symptomatic of a wider therapeutic trend within many contemporary neoliberal societies, with the popularisation of psychologised understandings of personal subjectivity (Rose, 1999) and the emergence of markets in "self-health..."how to" books on health and well-being" (Stacey, 2000, p115) focused on personal transformation and improvement. The texts analysed here are ones aimed at popular audiences, for example, parents who want to learn how to support their autistic children. The representations of autistic people within these texts are likely to be received by greater numbers of readers when compared to those featured in scientific and autistic self-advocacy literature, texts which have smaller, more specialist readerships. The ways in which such texts frame autistic people's experiences of disability, gender, and sexuality are therefore important to analyse, since these texts can play a key role in informing the views of non-autistic professionals, parents, and partners. Pathologising representations of autistic life promoted to general audiences, for example, may have negative implications for autistic people's well-being as such representations encourage disablist attitudes within the public sphere.

Many of these texts have been published by the London-based publisher Jessica Kingsley mentioned earlier, a publishing house which is, according to its official website, "committed to publishing books that make a difference" (Jessica Kingsley, 2020, para1). As a company Jessica Kingsley has an established history of publishing books relating to "the autism spectrum" aimed at both "professionals and general readers" (para2). Books produced by this publisher, I argue, are worth studying when analysing popular representations of autistic people. Such books are the sort of commonly available texts which professionals and parents engaging with autistic people will seek out on account of the publisher's reach and reputation. In addition, several self-help books published by Jessica Kingsley explicitly explore matters of gender and sexuality in autistic people's lives, for example, focusing upon the experiences of autistic women and LGBTQ people.

All the texts featured in this chapter's sample are intended by their authors to improve readers' understandings of autistic people, including the gendered and sexual aspects of their lives. Some of the texts offer examples of the ways in which non-autistic people seek to understand and approach autistic people with the expressed aim of improving autistic people's lives, whilst other texts are written by autistic people for the benefit of autistic people.

The texts examined in this chapter are as follows:

Autism, Explaining the Enigma: Second Edition–Uta Frith (2003) Oxford: Blackwell Publishing

Girls Growing Up on the Autism Spectrum: What Parents and Professionals Should Know About the Pre-Teen and Teenage Years-Shana Nichols with Gina Marie Moravick and Samara Pulver Tetenbaum (2009) London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

The Other Half of Asperger Syndrome (Autism Spectrum Disorder): A Guide to Living in an Intimate Relationship with a Partner who is on the Autistic Spectrum-Maxine Aston (2014) London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

The Autism Spectrum Guide to Sexuality and Relationships: Understand Yourself and Make Choices that are Right for You-Emma Goodall (2016) London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Understanding Life Experiences From Early Childhood to Old Age-Sarah Hendrickx (2015) London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

The Myth of Autism: Medicalising Boy's Social and Emotional Competence-Sami Timimi, Neil Gardner and Brian McCabe (2010) Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan

Autism as Enigma

As noted in Chapter 2, the theory of mindblindness developed by Baron-Cohen (1999) builds upon work by Uta Frith (2003). Since the 1960s, Frith has played a notable role in developing an influential account of how autism functions as a neurological condition, presenting autism as the result of a deficit of a theory of mind in certain individuals (Evans, 2017). As a result, it is important to consider a key text by Frith within this textual sample. Frith's work encapsulates psychological research into autism as a biological condition which theoretically informs self-help texts of the sort explored in this chapter.

Frith's book *Autism, Explaining the Enigma,* first published in 1989 and subsequently updated and reissued in 2003, is intended by the author to tell "the story of the scientific endeavour to understand autism," combining "hard science and romantic ideas, objectivity and passion" (2003, pvi) in the process. Analysing such a text, one written by a notable researcher intending to make scientific research accessible to a mass audience, can help to demonstrate how such research has come to inform contemporary representations of autistic people featured in other texts. Frith's book does not explicitly address matters of gender and sexuality in autistic people's lives but is nevertheless worth exploring in my view since her framings of autistic experience within the book have implications for autistic people's lives in general, including those who face particular challenges related to gender and sexuality.

In Friths' account, autism is "a disorder of *development*" (p1) (italicized in original), with her text focused on how autism manifests as a medical condition. In addition, the text considers the implications that autism has for non-autistic people, such as families with autistic children. Frith's portrayal of autistic people proves multifaceted in nature over the course of her text. Certain elements present potential challenges to disablism, offering representations of autistic people which are compatible with the neurodiversity paradigm as described by Walker (2014). At the same time, Frith's account contains elements which present more negative implications for autistic people in terms of clinical and popular representations, ones that are worth critiquing from a neurodiversity standpoint.

In her Preface, Frith remarks that "autistic individuals, just as blind individuals, each have their distinct and unique personalities and their own way of managing their life" (2003, pix). Such a remark can be seen to challenge framings of autistic people as being inferior to those who are not autistic. In drawing parallels with the experiences of other disabled people, and arguing that they can live fulfilling lives regardless of their impairments, Frith's portrayal of autistic people appears supportive of a neurodiversity perspective. Such a perspective challenges the disabling representation of autistic people as being abnormal on account of their differences and instead portrays such differences as worthy of acceptance.

Exploring the text further, I argue that the book's sixth chapter, entitled "Autistic Aloneness" (p98), comes close to articulating a position which echoes the neurodiversity paradigm. As the title suggests, this chapter focuses upon autistic people's apparent loneliness as a result of their condition. Frith considers how this phenomena relates to research carried out by herself and other scientists into autistic people's impairments regarding communication and interaction. Frith concludes the chapter with the following passage:

> The emotional life of people with autism is very likely to be different from normal. Yet it is tempting to project on them our own emotions, often inappropriately. It is only right to acknowledge that some individuals with autism are happy to be left alone to indulge in their solitary activities. Many would never spontaneously seek social contact. Young children with autism seldom run to be hugged when they need comfort and may appear to dislike bodily contact. Roberta, a highly intelligent adult with autism,

> forcefully articulates that she wishes to be by herself and not to share a home with anybody else. She is content and pities people like David, who crave the company of a girlfriend, but cannot attain it. Her example shows that being alone and autistic is not necessarily a bleak state.
>
> (p115)

In this passage, Frith's argument offers the reader a representation of autistic people's experiences which treats autistic people as being distinct from non-autistic people, but not as being inherently defective on account of their impairments. Autistic people may experience life differently from non-autistic people, the passage suggests, but this should not lead to their lives being understood in negative terms. Such a passage actively encourages non-autistic people to be more accepting of autistic people's experiences, as Frith explicitly warns against non-autistic people projecting their own assumptions onto the lives of autistic people. Frith challenges the notion that autistic people should engage in the dominant terms of normalcy, using the example of Roberta to support her argument in this passage. She suggests that autistic people's discomforts around intimate physical contact and preference for living alone should be accepted as legitimate. Such behaviours do not mean that autistic people inherently live in "a bleak state" (ibid) compared to neurotypical people. Read in isolation the passage could even be viewed as advocating for a social model-based understanding of autistic people's experiences. The passage implies that social contexts, such as the attitudes of non-autistic people towards autistic people, are problematic in nature, rather than autistic people themselves being defective or suffering personal tragedy on account of their differences. I argue that this aspect of Frith's text encourages non-autistic readers to be more accepting of autistic people. Such a message of acceptance, which has the prestige of Frith's scientific credibility, potentially offers positive implications for autistic people's everyday lives, for example, encouraging non-autistic parents to appreciate their autistic children's particular needs around familial intimacy. Such aspects of the text emphasise autistic people's right to be different in the face of disabling social norms, challenging representations which portray autistic people in terms of defects or personal tragedy.

At the same time, such passages must be recognised as only forming part of Frith's wider portrayal of autistic people's experiences. Other aspects of her text prove far more problematic and troubling in nature when subject to critical analysis. At an earlier point in the text, for example, Frith remarks that autism is a "puzzling disorder…subtle and so vicious in its effects: allowing so much developmental progress and yet cruelly preventing full integration into the community" (p5). In contrast to the representations of autistic experiences considered in the earlier passages, this remark reproduces a pathologising medical framing of autism. This framing explicitly presents autism as damaging to autistic people's lives. If it were not for autism, such a passage suggests, children would be able to grow and properly develop into active members of society. Autistic deficits are responsible for the inability of individuals to participate in the wider community, rather than disabling social environments having prevented them from being able to do so. In this respect, Frith's choice of language pathologises autistic people, with autism negatively coded as being "vicious" (ibid) and cruel in nature. As described earlier, Frith clearly recognises that there are risks in projecting non-autistic assumptions onto the experiences of autistic people. In this passage, however, Frith herself can be seen to engage in such a form of projection, with troubling implications for understandings of autistic experience.

Frith's pathologisation of aspects of autistic experience proves even more troubling at other points in her book. The following passage, taken from a section of the book in which Frith explores "a variety of stories and myths" which appear to "evoke images of autism" (p18), provides an additional example of such pathologisation at work within the text:

> The classic fairy tales "Snow White" and "The Sleeping Beauty," popularized by Disney films in the twentieth century, but dating back to the brothers Grimm in the early years of the nineteenth century, and Charles Perrault at the end of the seventeenth century

> respectively, contain a number of different themes. One of these is the theme of death-like sleep, or rather, lifelike death. This strangely paradoxical image conveys a quality of experience that is familiar to those who are closely involved with certain cases of autistic disorder: the beautiful child is tantalizingly near, yet so far; physically present, yet remote. The hedge of thorns or the glass coffin are perfect for representing the impossibility of reaching the child. In the case of autism, however much the child's appearance seems to indicate that it is normal and healthy ("awake"), the child's social isolation show after all that it is not ("asleep").
>
> (p17)

Analysing this passage, I argue that, in her effort to understand autism through folklore and popular culture, Frith produces a harmful representation of autistic life. In framing autism in terms of extreme inaccessibility, as a state akin to death, Frith portrays autism as a tragedy for individuals. Such a representation present autism as a problematic condition which prevents children from engaging with their families and communities. Neurotypical people, such as parents or scientific researchers, are portrayed in this passage as unable to truly connect with such children on account of their autistic impairments. Autism means that the apparently "normal and healthy" (ibid) child is in reality abnormal and afflicted, tragically condemned to a life of isolation. In this way, I argue that Frith gives scientific credibility to a harmful understanding of autism as a personal tragedy.

Narratives of autism as a personal tragedy for individuals and families, as echoed by Frith in this passage, are ones rejected by neurodiversity scholars. As explored in the previous chapter, Sinclair (2012) condemns the parental narrative of mourning which depicts autistic children as lost to their disorder, arguing that such a narrative pathologises autistic people. Frith's framing of autism as "lifelike death" (2003, p17) reinforces such a narrative, legitimising sentiments of despair and anger that, in practice, come to be directed at the autistic child.

As noted by McGuire, narratives of autism as a tragedy suggest that “autism is not life” (2016, p192), but rather an infliction upon people’s lives. These narratives encourage disablist and eugenicist sentiments towards autistic people, whether this be in in terms of research efforts to cure autism or indeed disablist physical violence. Frith’s account is not as problematic as those being contested by Sinclair and McGuire, with Frith elsewhere in the text countering pathologising views of autism, but nevertheless I argue that there remain disablist elements within the text’s representations of autistic people.

Furthermore, in her positioning of autistic people as unable to socially integrate on account of their impairments, Frith downplays the social contexts of disability. This problematic aspect of the text is reinforced by Frith’s understanding of autism as a condition defined by difficulties in conceptualising the mental processes of others, with autistic people’s inability to fully “mentalize” (2003, p79) resulting in their impairments. As Yergeau suggests in her overview of theory of mind literature, such framings underestimate autistic people’s intellectual capacities, establishing “a binary between...humans...and those distant Others” (2013, para14) who are viewed as lacking the ability to understand neurotypical people. Frith’s work overlooks the double empathy issue raised by Milton (2012a), as described in Chapter 3, which suggests that autistic people experience difficulties when communicating and interacting with non-autistic people in social environments dominated by the latter group. Frith’s work depicts autistic people as being primarily isolated on account of their biological deficits, failing to consider how social contexts determined by the norms of non-autistic people play a significant role in restricting autistic people’s capabilities.

Building on the work of Yergeau and Milton, I argue that despite elements within Frith’s text which challenge disablism the text nevertheless contains pathologising representations of autistic people. These representations overlook the role of social contexts in negatively affecting autistic people’s experiences, portraying autistic people in medical and tragic terms. For Frith, the “social isolation” of the autistic child demonstrates that the child cannot be “normal and healthy” (2003, p16). The possibility that social contexts determined by neurotypical people present barriers for autistic people is not adequately considered in her account. In this respect, the text fails to provide readers with an account of autistic people's experiences which highlights the role of disablism in affecting their lives.

In putting forward this critique of Frith's representation, I do not deny that some autistic people do face particular challenges as a result of impairments. For some autistic people, Frith's portrayal of communication and interaction difficulties resulting in social isolation may speak to their experiences. My critique of Frith's book is that, in its attempt to provide an accessible psychological account of autistic experience, the text overemphasises the personalised aspects of autism's potential challenges for individuals. In this way, I argue that Frith fails to sufficiently analyse the role of social contexts in influencing autistic people's lives. Such an analytical failure proves particularly problematic since the text addresses itself to parents and carers. Frith's authoritative voice as a psychologist risks marginalising autistic people's own perspectives regarding their experiences, providing non-autistic readers with a partial understanding of what it means to be autistic. As Chapter 3 demonstrated, autistic people have historically been understood through terms created by non-autistic experts. Frith's book, in my view, reinforces such a divide between the framings produced by non-autistic experts and the perspectives of autistic people themselves, with the former's knowledge accepted by non-autistic readers at the expense of the latter.

In advancing this argument, I recognise that Frith's understanding of autistic people reflects her position as a psychologist. The text's emphasis on the personal and biomedical therefore does not come as a surprise. Her use of imagery associated with death and eternal sleep could be read as an effort to draw upon existing narratives of personal tragedy to reach a wider audience, allowing her to put forward a more nuanced, scientifically-informed framework for understanding autistic people. In practice, however, I argue that Frith's approach proves to be flawed in nature. The text reproduces pathologising framings of autistic people as it attempts to demystify autism for non-autistic readers.

In order to improve popular understandings of autistic people, as Frith's text is intended to, I argue that there is a need for accounts that approach both the biological and social dimensions of autistic life. Such texts necessarily transcend the disciplinary boundaries of Frith's text. In my view, analysis of Frith's text shows that it cannot be totally rejected as a problematic account of autism, as it does challenges elements of disablism facing autistic people. At the same time, the text's framings of autistic experiences in terms of biological defects and personal tragedy are problematic from a neurodiversity perspective, with troubling implications for autistic people's own lives.

Self-Help Resources

As suggested earlier, the proliferation of self-help literature in recent decades can be understood as a consequence of a broader therapeutic turn in Western neoliberal societies. As Rose highlights, "psychotherapeutic language and advice" have become prevalent across "the mass media of communication" (1999, p218), including written texts aimed at informing and influencing the views and behaviours of mass readerships. Texts within this self-help genre are, as Stacey puts it, "pre-occupied with self-development, self-knowledge, self-control, self-improvement and self-healing" (2000, p116). Such texts draw upon personal experience, professional expertise, and other cultural resources to provide advice to readers on how best to navigate their personal problems and thereby transform their lives. As a result, the self-help books featured in this chapter's textual sample could be sceptically approached as simply being manifestations of a wider neoliberal focus in contemporary societies on the importance of personal psychological transformation. Texts focusing on autism written by Nichols et al. (2009), Aston (2014), Hendrickx (2015), and Goodall (2016) may therefore be assumed to offer representations of autistic people which focus upon the importance of individual responsibility and personal change, as autistic people are encouraged to embrace the normative standards of neoliberal society (Slater, 2015).

Furthermore, the therapeutic nature of such self-help texts may appear to risk reproducing the medical model of disability in which "atypical bodies and minds as deviant, pathological, and defective" are "best understood and addressed in medical terms" (Kafer, 2013, p5). Such a model, as seen in the case of Frith's text, can downplay the role of social conditions in disabling autistic people. These texts would therefore appear to risk positioning autistic people in pathologising terms. Such terms can both inform the attitudes of non - autistic readers in problematic ways, as they come to regard autistic people primarily in terms of biological defects, while at the same time encouraging autistic readers to understand their own experiences in disabling biomedical and psychological terms.

In this light, it is obvious that certain limitations are inevitably present in contemporary self-help texts discussing autistic people. Such texts will primarily focus upon the personal dimensions of what it means to be autistic, rather than analysing social environments which impact autistic people or offering political solutions to address disablist oppression. A parental resource guide informing non-autistic parents on how to raise their autistic child, for example, is distinct from a neurodiversity polemic against disablism. Such self-help texts inevitably contain elements which can be questioned from a neurodiversity standpoint concerned with analysing social and political matters which affect autistic people's lives.

At the same time, however, I argue that close analysis of these particular self-help texts demonstrates that they contain framings of autistic people's experiences of disability, gender, and sexuality which challenge biomedical and disablist terms. These texts frame autism in terms of difference rather than deficit, thereby challenging narratives of autism as a personal tragedy requiring biomedical intervention. In this respect, the texts are in dialogue with the insights of the neurodiversity paradigm, promoting understandings of autistic people's lived experiences which challenge disablist oppression. In addition, several of these texts explore autistic gender and sexuality in ways which challenge pathologisation and recognise the diversity of autistic people's lives as gendered and sexual subjects. In these ways, although the texts may broadly adhere to the conventions of literature within the genre of self-help and therapy in terms of a central focus on personal and medical matters, as opposed to broader social concerns, they nevertheless feature elements which trouble the conventions of such a genre and thereby provide autistic and non-autistic audiences with more critical perspectives.

As Rose notes, “childhood is the most intensively governed sector of personal existence” within contemporary neoliberal societies, with “the modern child” having become “the focus of innumerable projects that purport to safeguard it from physical, sexual or moral danger, to ensure its ‘normal’ development, to actively promote certain capacities of attributes such as intelligence, educability, and emotional stability” (1999, p123). In certain respects, Nichols et al.’s 2009 text reflects these sorts of projects. The text provides readers with advice regarding issues which are relevant to the lives of autistic girls and teenagers, including emotional development, puberty, sexual health, friendships, and sexual relationships. The text is intended as a support guide for parents and medical professionals, one informed by the co-authors’ clinical work with autistic girls and young women. The co-authors’ explicit focus on treating non-autistic family members and professionals as the text’s “primary audience” (p15), rather than directly addressing autistic girls and teenagers themselves, could be read as placing limitations on the book. As in Frith’s text, there appears the risk of non-autistic medical expertise being elevated over the views of autistic people. In this case, autistic girls and young women risk being treated in a paternalistic manner by parents and professionals acting on such clinical expertise, rather than the text offering forms of advice based on autistic people’s own views which encourage forms of self-advocacy.

Exploring the text itself, however, it is clear that the co-authors do make space for autistic perspectives, and draw upon them when informing parents and professionals. The co-authors, for example, recommend autistic people’s memoirs and autobiographies to readers throughout the text. In this way, Nichols et al. discourage readers from purely relying upon non-autistic medial expertise as a means of understanding autistic people. As an example, Chapter 1 of the text, entitled “What Do We Know Currently Know about Girls and Women with Autism Spectrum Disorders?” (p17), concludes with a resources list intended to complement the book's own information. This list includes subgroups of "Personal accounts by women" and "Personal accounts by girls and young adults" (p40). Such sections signpost autistic people's own works to readers, thereby educating non-autistic parents and professionals, and potentially helping autistic readers themselves to discover autistic perspectives.

Furthermore, Chapter 9 offers space for autistic perspectives through an account of the experiences of "Maureen and Maura Petro," with Maura being "a 19-year-old woman with Asperger's Syndrome" (p294) and Maureen her non-autistic mother. A considerable amount of the autobiographical writing featured in the chapter is authored by Maureen, although Maura's own voice is featured at several points. Short written passages detailing Maura's experiences growing up as someone with Asperger syndrome occasionally interrupt the main body of Maureen's narrative. Such passages explore issues of disablist bullying Maura received from children and teachers at school, her subsequent experiences of mental distress, her more positive experiences of support in a specialist school, and her romantic desires. In this way, the text provides space for an autistic young woman to articulate her multifaceted experiences, rather than the text simply reporting clinical case studies or parental perspectives on autistic girls and young women's lives. Maura's extracts complement Maureen's account by providing her own perspectives as an autistic teenager regarding the issues and events described by her mother.

In opening up space for autistic girls' voices to challenge oppression, and providing signposting to autistic self-authored texts, I argue that Nichols et al.'s text contests harmful representations of autistic people, empowering autistic girls in their everyday lives in the process. The text may be limited by its primary emphasis upon clinical accounts, but at the same time, inclusion of autistic perspectives ensures that the text offers more than the co-authors' own non-autistic views. The text provides an opportunity for the perspectives of autistic girls to be granted a platform, and in this way reach relevant audiences who can benefit from listening to autistic voices as they care for autistic children and young people.

The text therefore provides representations of autistic girls and young women's experiences to readers which are distinct from scientific and pop cultural framings which often feature pathologising, essentialist, and infantilising elements.

In addition, I argue that there are feminist and neurodiversity elements within the text that frame autistic people's experiences beyond medical and normative terms. The co-authors' commitment to supporting autistic girls and young women is clear throughout, with the writers expressing a desire, in keeping with "a history of sisterhood-of weaving a rich fable of stories of hope, difficulty and determination" (p11), to pass on their knowledge to others. Early on in the text, the co-authors express discontent with "current diagnostic tools" (p26) which fail to recognise autistic girls and women. The co-authors argue that "girls are being excluded from important research" (p27) into autism, meaning that research which could improve their lives is not being produced. Nichols et al. acknowledge that autism has historically been represented as a masculine condition, with their desire to encourage research into autistic girls and young women's experiences contributing to wider struggles focused on recognising the needs of this marginalised group. The text's gender specific focus, for example, the explorations of issues such as disordered eating and sexual violence which negatively affect autistic girls and young women, can be understood in intersectional terms as a feminist intervention in support of autistic girls and women. Such an intervention recognises the particular challenges which face this group on account of the intersections of autism with womanhood, challenges which have historically been inadequately acknowledged by researchers and clinicians.

Furthermore, the text's exploration of issues of sexuality for autistic girls and women challenges disablist framings of these issues. As Mollow and McRuer (2012) argue, "rarely are disabled people regarded as either desiring subjects or objects of desire" (p1). Nichols et al. explicitly oppose such a perspective, seeking to challenge "myths about sexuality and developmental disabilities" such as the notion that "only able-minded or able-bodied females should engage in sexual behaviour" (2009, p207) or that "females with developmental disabilities need to be protected from society" (p208). They emphasise the diverse perspectives and experiences of autistic girls and young women regarding sexuality. The co-authors encourage parents and professionals to support autistic girls as they develop "healthy sexuality," for example, through ensuring that they "have their sexuality appreciated, accepted and understood by others," and that they "get to express their sexuality in ways that are socially acceptable" (p211). Nichol's et al. argue in favour of recognising the legitimacy of aromantic and asexual feelings on the part of autistic girls and young women, with the co-authors stating that parents should see "not wanting to date" as "perfectly acceptable" (p236). They also argue that parents should be accepting of their autistic daughters if they come out as non-heterosexual. In these ways, the text challenges forms of heterosexism that negatively impact the lives of autistic girls and young women, preventing them from having their particular needs recognised and met. In doing so, the text re-orientates framings of autistic experience away from essentialist ones which regard autism as inherently masculine, as well as depictions of autistic people as being pathologically asexual.

There remain certain ambivalences in the text's feminist and neurodivergent politics, however. Such ambivalences prove most explicit in the co-authors' discussion of the role of fashion in improving autistic girls and young women's emotional well-being. Nichols et al. remark that "in working with families and girls" they have never sought to make autistic girls "popular...more "neurotypical" or to make them conform to society's current ideas of what is fashionable for young women of their age" (p145). On an initial reading, the declaration appears to oppose disablist and gendered efforts to force autistic girls to conform to societal standards. The co-authors proceed to argue, however, that they believe "that when girls dress neatly and presentably and within the loosely defined boundaries of what is considered acceptable for youth their age, they are less vulnerable to teasing and are more likely to have opportunities to develop friendships" (ibid). In this way, the co-authors advocate for individualised efforts to discourage disablist bullying and harassment, emphasising how autistic girls can be encouraged to fit into social environments to avoid discrimination. As a result, whilst the text in certain respects adheres to a feminist and neurodivergent politics, I argue that in the end the text’s therapeutic nature prevents it from fully supporting collective efforts to tackle the social causes of oppression facing autistic girls and young women. The text emphasises personalised solutions aimed at accommodation, rather than political action to ensure that structural disablement is challenged. Considering that research into efforts by autistic people to mask and camouflage their autism suggest that the pressures of maintaining such appearances often result in mental distress (Hull et al., 2017; Cook, Ogden and Winstone, 2018), the co-authors’ personalised solutions would appear to risk causing harm to autistic girls and young women. In current conditions, efforts by autistic people to fit in and disguise their autism may prove necessary to protect themselves in the absence of wider social change, but there are clearly limitations to this text’s emphasis on personal efforts to avoid discrimination. Social conditions which harm autistic people, as the neurodiversity movement suggests, can only be addressed through collective self-advocacy and social change.

Rooted in her work as a couples counsellor with “over a decade of experience of working with individuals, couples and families affected by Asperger syndrome,” alongside her own relationship “with a partner who was given a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome” (Aston, 2014, p12), Aston’s text offers guidance for non-autistic people in intimate personal relationships with autistic people. Aston acknowledges that Asperger syndrome is now contained within the broader clinical category of autism, as described in Chapter 1 of this thesis, but suggests that her book remains useful for supporting autistic people generally. She intends the text to be “for all who love a partner who has Asperger syndrome (Autism Spectrum Disorder)” (p5). The book covers a wide range of issues, from advice on helping a partner receive an official autism diagnosis to addressing autistic routines which may affect intimate relationships. As Aston puts it, “the aim of this book is to offer a ray of hope to the non-Asperger partner and to offer them understanding and support in their endeavours to make sense of both their partner and their relationship” (p13).

In the book’s Preface, Aston notes that the text’s first 2003 edition was produced for the National Autistic Society in a context of limited research and literature regarding autistic people and relationships, a context where “many professionals still held the belief that people with Asperger syndrome did not marry or even form relationships” (ibid). Aston positions her book as a challenge to such a belief, drawing upon autistic people’s own experiences to demonstrate how autistic people are capable of such relationships. In this way, like Nichols et al.’s text, the text contests disablist framings promoted by some biomedical experts, ones which suggest that autistic people are incapable of engaging in intimate relationships. In conveying such a message to non-autistic people involved in relationships with autistic partners, the text frames forms of autistic sexuality as legitimate. In this way, Aston’s text offers readers the promise of improving intimate relationships between autistic people and their partners, thereby challenging pathologising and normative representations of autistic people as sexual subjects.

Aston’s text engages with the intersections of autism, gender, and sexuality in people’s lives by exploring how such entanglements manifest in personal relationships. She states that the guide is intended for anyone whose partner has Asperger syndrome “regardless of whether they are male, female, lesbian, gay or transgendered” (p12), and at various points in the text considers the situation of autistic women involved in relationships. In this respect, Aston’s text challenges heteronormative, gender normative, and masculinist framings of autistic life. In doing so, the text becomes potentially useful for supporting autistic people who are marginalised on account of their gender and sexuality. As highlighted earlier, the influential accounts such as those of Baron-Cohen have inadequately engaged with the experiences of such people. Non-autistic partners seeking to understand the experiences of autistic people who are not heterosexual, gender normative, or men are therefore able to engage with a more inclusive account of autistic experience in Aston’s book compared to texts more overtly influenced by biomedical and psychological framings. This, in turn, offers the potential for improved intimate relationships between autistic and neurotypical people, and presents alternative ways of representing autistic experience.

Aston notes in her text that Asperger syndrome has historically been associated with masculinity, highlighting clinical research that suggests that “Asperger syndrome seems to affect more males than females” (p21). She argues that based upon her own work there may be more women with Asperger syndrome than have been historically diagnosed, and recommends that non-autistic men read autistic women’s autobiographical accounts so that they can gain “valuable information” (p22) about their autistic partners. In these respects, Aston as a non-autistic psychological expert emphasises the historically more marginalised experiences of autistic women. The text proposes understandings of autistic people which recognise their own diverse experiences and needs as gendered and sexual subjects, ones which can better inform neurotypical people to be respectful and supportive in their intimate relationships with autistic people.

Other parts of the text, however, contain troubling elements in regards to the framing of autistic people. In particular, Aston’s depiction of autistic people’s apparent impairments around empathy proves problematic in nature. Aston explores this issue in considerable detail in Chapter 21 of her book, focusing on the implications of autistic people’s “lack of empathy” (p114) for intimate relationships. In her analysis, she encourages non-autistic partners to adapt their behaviours to meet the distinct needs of autistic people, but at the same time uncritically accepts that autistic people lack empathy. She remarks that non-autistic partners “are unlikely to be appreciated for all the effort, time and self-sacrifice they have to put into the relationship because of the presence of the syndrome” (ibid). Aston makes clear that she is not suggesting that those with Asperger syndrome “do not care or feel concern” (p115) for their intimate partners, but her framing nevertheless suggests to non-autistic readers that Asperger syndrome equates to a state of emotional distance. Such a framing of autistic experience risks pathologising autistic people.

In addition, one of Aston’s suggestions for non-autistic partners seeking to cope with difficulties in their intimate relationships appears to further pathologise autistic people involved in such relationships. Towards the end of Chapter 21, Aston writes the following passage based on the accounts of former clients:

> One of the ways in which some men and women coped in such a non-reciprocal relationship was by externalising all their partner's negative traits, blaming them on Asperger syndrome. They blamed the syndrome as if it were a third party and could then live with their partner's behaviours. Sometimes this may make the difference between continuing in the relationship or not…Externalisation of blame is not unusual-it it is a way of dealing with the flaws our loved ones have. Often when things go wrong for people, such as failing at a task, they blame all manner of things, from lack of time to the weather. The fact, then, that so many men and women blame Asperger syndrome for everything negative about their partners is not so unusual. It is, in fact, a brilliant strategy and it really works. Remember, though that there are many things your partner can make choices about, just like anyone else.
>
> (pp116-117)

In my view, whilst such a practice of externalising blame may be helpful for some neurotypical people involved in intimate relationships, this passage remains troubling in nature. Aston's proposal risks normalising understandings of Asperger syndrome as a problem which creates inherent difficulties in intimate relationships. Aston suggests that blaming autism as a biomedical condition will direct non-autistic partner's negative sentiments away from their partners towards an externalised object, thereby resolving difficulties. In response, I would argue that, since people's experiences of autism are inherent to their personal identities, it is difficult in practice to establish a clear distinction between the label and the person. In the context of intimate relationships, I fear that such a practice can simply exacerbate problems, as an autistic person's state of being is viewed as defective by their neurotypical partner.

Furthermore, such an approach to resolving relationship difficulties overlooks the role of social environments in disabling autistic people, even on the microlevel of everyday intimate relationships. Echoing the terms of the medical model, Aston's framing treats the impairments of Asperger syndrome as the primary source of difficulties, rather than acknowledging the role of social contexts. As highlighted by Milton, interactions between autistic and non-autistic people are affected by norms shaped by the latter group. Sexual and romantic relationships, I argue, are not immune to the effects of such norms. Aston's status as a relationship advisor grants her apparent solution to relationship difficulties a form of credibility for non-autistic readers, who may adopt such an approach in their own strained relationships. Such reception may prove potentially detrimental to autistic participants in such relationships who have their personal identities framed as inherently defective. In this respect, her representation of autistic people may present harmful implications for some autistic people involved in intimate relationships.

In advancing this critique, I do not deny that there are elements within Aston's text which speak back to more harmful representations of autistic people as subjects. Aspects of her text explicitly challenge pathologising framings of autistic people's experiences, whilst providing useful information for supporting autistic people who have marginalised genders and sexualities. At the same time, I argue that Aston reproduces framings of autistic experience which are problematic in nature, thereby shaping popular understandings of autistic experience in potentially harmful ways.

In contrast to the more ambivalent nature of Nichols et al.'s and Aston's texts regarding autism, gender, and sexuality, I argue that Goodall's text offers an approach to exploring autistic people's lives as gendered and sexual subjects which aligns with the neurodiversity movement. As Goodall explains, her book is written from the perspective of an autistic self-advocate. Such a commitment to self-advocacy can be seen to inform her framings of autistic gender and sexuality throughout the text. Her text takes the form of a self-help book addressed to autistic people themselves, and her advice draws upon autistic people’s own perspectives and accounts. Rather than advising non-autistic carers on how to address issues of autistic gender and sexuality, Goodall’s book directly offers autistic people advice on how to ensure that they have supportive emotional and sexual relationships. In one case, she advises autistic readers on “how to tell when someone is only pretending to be your friend, or is not your friend” (2016, p53), helping autistic people to avoid potential harms on the part of non-autistic people on an intimate level. Advice is directly communicated to autistic people, encouraging their capacities for self-advocacy. In this way, Goodall’s book frames autistic people as needing support to navigate social matters, but avoids reducing them to their impairments in an infantilising manner.

Goodall’s text relies heavily upon passages from autistic people themselves, rather than primarily relying upon clinical experience and parental accounts as in Nichols et al.’s text. In this way, the author’s general advice is complemented by personal accounts from other autistic people exploring issues covered in the book. In doing so, Goodall provides space for autistic people’s own voices, as such accounts advise autistic readers on how to approach issues such as familial abuse and having fulfilling sexual experiences. As a result, autistic readers do not have to rely upon the accounts and advice of non-autistic clinicians. In turn, I argue that, for non-autistic readers of the text, Goodall’s book improves their understandings of autistic people’s experiences regarding sexuality and gender, representing these experiences in terms which are not infantilising or pathologising.

Early on in her text, Goodall acknowledges “that the level of gender and sexual divergence in the autistic community is higher than in the rest of society” (p16). She makes clear to readers that the text seeks to offer relationship advice for non-heterosexual and gender nonconforming autistic people, who she suggests have their experiences unacknowledged in other texts exploring autism and sexuality. The text offers readers explorations of various topics related to sexuality and gender, from bisexuality and pansexuality, to trans and non-binary genders. In doing so, the text challenges heterosexist and gender normative norms which marginalise autistic people who live outside of the dominant terms of sexuality and gender. In this way, as in Nichols et al.'s and Aston's texts, the text re-orientates understandings of autistic sexuality and gender away from influential framings towards a recognition of autistic people's sexual and gender diversity. The text represents autistic people in diverse terms that promote a more accepting society, one in which neurodiversity and sexual and gender diversity are recognised and celebrated.

In her 2015 book, Hendrickx similarly explores diverse issues of autistic gender and sexuality, focusing upon the experiences of autistic women and girls. Hendrickx, who discovered that she was autistic after already writing several books about autism, openly states at the book's beginning that it is partially intended to transform professional understandings of autistic people. She remarks that "if the gatekeepers of diagnosis and subsequent support are unaware, individuals and families will be powerless to get what they need" (p13), and hopes that the text will help women who believe they are autistic to "find solidarity, shared experiences and the courage to seek diagnosis if that is what they need" (p19). As in Goodall's book, the text explicitly draws upon autistic people's own experiences. The author includes quotations from autistic women to illustrate the issues under discussion, ranging from autistic girls' struggles in unsupportive educational environments, to sexual and emotional relationships with partners.

Hendrickx explicitly acknowledges how gendered social norms in society affect the experiences of autistic girls and women. In a discussion of the ways in which particular "characteristics of autism" such as communication issues appear in autistic women, she notes that "societal expectations for women" (p127) result in negative reactions to such traits. Autistic traits in girls and women are viewed as incompatible with gendered social norms. Such negative reactions, she notes, can impact upon autistic women's "self-esteem and consequently mental health" (ibid) in a potentially greater manner than reactions to such traits in autistic men. In this way, Hendrickx highlights the gendered dynamics of psycho-emotional disablement facing autistic women, as their experiences are affected by the intersecting oppressions of misogyny and disablement. Her text draws readers attention to the particular forms of disablement faced by autistic women which are unacknowledged in other influential accounts, working to challenge such disablist and gendered oppression.

Furthermore, in her exploration of how autism is entangled with gender, Hendrickx challenges accounts which frame autistic people as being inherently masculine on account of their condition. As in Goodall's text, the author explores the experiences of autistic people who are gender variant, discussing those of autistic people who are genderfluid, genderless, and transgender. She highlights the ways in which some autistic people who fall outside of the terms of neurotypicality also identify as being outside the terms of gender normativity.

Hendrickx's text openly rejects essentialist representations of autistic people as inherently masculine. She disputes the notion "that women on the autism spectrum present a less feminised profile (p154), as suggested by the extreme male brain framing. Instead, she argues that autistic women view themselves as masculine because of dominant understandings of gender which portray them as outside the terms of normative femininity and womanhood. In highlighting such experiences and explicitly drawing upon autistic women and gender variant people's perspectives through the use of direct quotations, Hendrickx's text challenges the influential and essentialist framing of autism as a masculine condition. In this way, the text enables the voices of more marginalised autistic people to be heard. In including such elements within a text aimed at medical professionals, Hendrickx challenges the medical gatekeeping which negatively impacts autistic people who fall outside the terms of the diagnostic criteria, terms historically associated with masculinity (Jack, 2014). The text encourages such professionals to abandon framings of autistic people as being inherently masculine in nature, and instead acknowledge the diversity of autistic people as gendered subjects as they seek to access medical support.

Furthermore, the text offers historically marginalised autistic women and gender variant people opportunities for better understanding their own experiences. The texts provides such readers with information they can deploy in their everyday lives, for example, getting access to medical support. In these ways, the text resembles Nichols et al.'s in terms of having a feminist element, as it emphasises the perspectives and experiences of more marginalised autistic people, and supports them in confronting oppressive disabling and gendered social forces.

Hendrick's text also explores autism's relationship to matters of sexuality, emphasising the experiences of autistic people who live outside the terms of heteronormativity. She notes how existing research and her own personal findings suggest that many autistic women are not heterosexual, and quotes passages from autistic lesbians who contributed accounts of their personal experiences to her book. In addition, Hendrickx echoes Goodall in representing autistic asexuality as being a legitimate form of sexual orientation. At the end of Chapter 10, the chapter specifically focused upon issues of sexuality and gender, she makes the following argument:

> I think the keys to a happier life are awareness and acceptance (both self-and society's) of people's differences, combined with knowledge and self-understanding. If both autism and the whole spectrum of sexuality are discussed openly and sincerely in mainstream society, then maybe there will be more tolerance of people's differences and this will lead to young people having the courage to be proud of who they are and not feeling so much pressure to conform.
>
> (p163)

In advancing such a perspective, Hendrickx explicitly demonstrates how matters of autism, gender, and sexuality in people's lives are intimately entangled in relation to the dominance of particular social norms, namely disablism, heteronormativity, and gender normativity. Neurodiversity is shown to be inextricably connected to gender and sexual diversity. I argue that not only does such a message present implications for autistic people, but also those who are marginalised on account of other dominant social norms. As Hendrickx's passage suggests, the neurodiversity movement's challenge to disablism intersects with struggles around gender and sexuality. As in the cases of Nichols et al. and Goodall's work, the text is written as a self-help guide, but it nevertheless offers an implicitly activist message to readers. Such a message not only challenges dominant framings of autistic people's experiences of gender and sexuality, but supports wider efforts to contest forms of disablist, gendered, and sexual oppression in society. The text challenges influential representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects, and offers alternative framings rooted in autistic people's diverse experiences.

Autism as Myth

Timimi et al. propose a radically different approach to the intersections of autism and gender in people's lives than those proposed by the authors discussed so far in this chapter. As Timimi puts it in the Preface, the co-authors argue that *"there is no such thing as autism and the label should be abolished"* (2010, px) (italicised in original). Positioning themselves in opposition to biomedical orthodoxy and powerful social actors, Timimi et al. seek to understand "the new age of the autism epidemic" (p14) in critical and political terms. They claim that "autism and its associated "industry" of research, services (private and public), advocacy organisations etc. are...built on shaky foundations" (pviii) similar to those of the pre-2008 crisis financial sector. Writing from the perspectives of a critical psychiatrist (Timimi) and two men labelled autistic who reject the label (Gardner and McCabe), the co-authors argue that autism does not actually exist as a biological condition. The co-authors suggest that there may be certain biological causes for "the kind of regression that thousands of parents of severely withdrawn children have witnessed," with some agent that is "congenital, peri-natal, or a biological reaction to environmental pathogens" (p1) potentially responsible for such symptoms. For the most part, however, the co-authors believe that autism is a social construct misapplied to describe the consequences of social phenomena. Timimi et al. instead view the apparent symptoms of autism as the consequences of social, political, and economic developments in neoliberal society, particularly in relation to gender. Timimi openly declares that the co-authors believe that they are helping to contribute to the eventual abandonment of autism as a biomedical label, suggesting that once society embraces "a thorough and robust evidence-based approach to mental health, then a palace called “autism” will be destroyed due to having unsafe foundations” (pviii).

In Timimi et al.’s account, autism is framed as a diagnosis which particularly impacts men and boys. Sociological analysis of autism as a socially constructed phenomena is complemented by passages of personal recollections from Gardner and McCabe which seek to demonstrate the problems of autism as a label in their own lives. In this text, the relationship between autism and masculinity is approached differently to Baron-Cohen’s work discussed earlier. As is Baron-Cohen’s work, Timimi et al. treat autism as a condition predominantly experienced by men. In their account, however, autism is presented as the result of the institutional biomedicalization of boys’ behaviours. Autism, according to them, functions as a biological label to describe behaviours which are pathologised by experts. Autism is a masculine condition, but instead of understanding autism as a biological condition constituted by extreme masculinity, Timimi et al. frame masculinity as having itself been biomedicalised. The co-authors argue that over the course of recent decades, the period in which autism has become publicly visible as a condition, boys and men have increasingly had their behaviours labelled as being autistic in nature by biomedical experts and professionals. In their view, such biomedicalization reflects the power relations of contemporary neoliberal society, with institutions such as schools driving this process. In putting forward such an argument, the co-authors declare that:

> If diagnoses like ASD and ADHD are telling us more about the state of gender relations in late capitalist societies than about biological processes in children’s brains, then clearly a better understanding of the former may be of greater importance to how we intervene than illuminating the biological processes that contribute to greater impulsivity or social awkwardness in boys than girls.
>
> (p212)

By developing such an account, Timimi et al. attempt to shift popular understandings of autistic experience, including the role of gender in autistic people's lives, away from the domains of biomedicine and psychology. The co-authors want autism to be understood in critical sociological terms. In their account, autism is not a biological phenomenon requiring medical attention but instead a product of contemporary neoliberal capitalist societies. Those wishing to understand autism are therefore encouraged to consider the social causes of the apparent disorder.

In putting forward such an argument, Timimi et al. in my view correctly move away from the limitations of official biomedical and psychological accounts, as found in the DSM and ICD described in Chapter 1. I agree with the co-authors that attempts to represent autistic people's experiences primarily in psychological and biomedical terms, such as efforts to uncover "biological processes in children's brains" (ibid), are reductionist in nature and fail to acknowledge the role of social contexts. Baron-Cohen's framing of the extreme male brain, which primarily emphasises the role of mental processes and hormones in gendering autistic people's experiences, provides a notable example of the limitations of such biologically reductionist analysis. In turn, the material implications of such a framing for autistic girls and women in terms of restricted access to services illustrates how cultural representations of gender and autism negatively shape autistic people's own lived experiences. In my view, developing theoretical approaches which consider autistic experiences within social contexts, including the role played by gender and sexuality, is worth pursuing. Such sociological analysis offers the possibility of producing more sophisticated accounts of autism as an embodied state of being affected by social forces such as sexual and gendered norms.

The central problem of Timimi et al.'s account, I argue, is that their exploration of how "the state of gender relations in late capitalist societies" (ibid) affects people diagnosed as autistic engages in a crude form of social constructionism. The co-authors' reconceptualisation of autism as merely a social construct imposed upon young boys and men offers readers a flawed theoretical approach. In seeking to contest what they regard as the flawed biological reductionism of dominant accounts, the co-authors themselves offer an equally reductionist account. Critically engaging with social contexts can productively reconceptualise autistic experiences, for example, acknowledging the marginalisation of autistic women and gender variant people. The co-authors' framing autism as a social construct caused by neoliberalism, however, offers a flawed form of such critical sociological scholarship.

The conclusions regarding the relationship between gender and autism advanced in Timimi et al.'s social constructionist account are worth critiquing in some depth. In one passage, the co-authors claim that:

> it is boys who are increasingly unable to fulfil the cultural expectations of an essentially-non gendered childhood and, thus, it is boys' behaviours that are increasingly perceived to fall out with the norm, often with a co-existent belief that this is caused by biological abnormalities.
>
> (p218)

Reading this passage, I would argue that despite their approach to analysing autism being a social constructionist one which critiques biomedical framings, in practice Timimi et al.'s own framing poses similar problematic consequences for autistic girls and women as such biomedical accounts. As the passage suggests, the co-authors treat diagnoses of cases autism as a form of labelling inflicted upon boys "unable to fulfil the cultural expectations" (ibid) of a non-gendered model of childhood prevalent within contemporary neoliberal society. Boys' behaviours are biomedicalised, pathologised by the institutions of neoliberal society as they fail to conform to current norms. Critiquing and abolishing the label of autism, in their view, becomes necessary in order to end such oppression.

By framing of autism as a masculine problem caused by social factors, with a gender neutral educational system labelling boys autistic on account of their inability to fit into such a social context, Timimi et al. fail to recognise and represent the experiences of autistic women and gender variant people in their critical account. If autism is merely the labelling of boys who cannot to fit into current social environments, then such an account fails to account for the struggles of autistic girls and gender variant youth. Such people face forms of disablism in their lives, with the gendered understanding of autism as a masculine condition contributing to their struggles within a social world shaped by non-autistic norms. Receiving a label of autism may not necessarily improve the position of such youth, as they may still receive bullying in schools or mistreatment by family, carers, and employers, but I am sceptical of the claim that abolishing the label would benefit such youth. I recognise, as Gardner and McCabe highlight in their personal accounts, that being labelled as autistic can present issues for people, for example, workplace discrimination and difficult engagements with advocacy organisations. At the same time, from my perspective as an autistic scholar informed by the neurodiversity paradigm, simply disregarding the label as an imposition is a flawed response. At the present moment, autism as an identity can form the basis of self-advocacy efforts which offer a more effective challenge to disablist oppression that the political approach advocated for by Timimi et al. in their text.

In their text, Timimi et al. are correct to critically analyse the relationship between autism and gender but they approach the subject in a flawed way, resulting in the analytical problems outlined so far. In my view, it is more theoretically and politically productive to critically consider how disablism and gendered oppression affect autistic young people of various genders. Dominant models of childhood development are shaped by processes of gendering and sexualisation (Slater, 2015) and prove disabling for autistic young people. It is not that childhood is now feminised, as Timimi et al. suggest, which results in the labelling of boys as autistic, but rather that autistic boys and other autistic youth are negatively affected by social norms determined by non-autistic people. In my view, attempting to contest such social norms as the neurodiversity movement does offers a better approach for confronting. the problems of autistic youth in general than Timimi et al.'s account. Their account, in dismissing autism as a harmful social construct imposed on boys, fails to challenge disabling forces which harm autistic girls and autistic gender variant youth. The co-authors are right to challenge socially constructed and oppressive “beliefs and practices that we have…in relation to childhood” (pviii) which negatively affect autistic youth, but their approach in my view proves a theoretical dead-end.

The flaw of such an approach for exploring the problems facing autistic people proves further apparent in passages detailing the co-authors’ predictions regarding the future dangers of autism as a diagnostic label. The co-authors offer their readers the following vision:

> Expansion of the ASD construct provides a new category of potentially dangerous people-those who lack empathy or social skills-and so new potential ways of categorising these individuals and dealing with them, hopefully (from a government’s point of view) outside the ever-expanding criminal justice system, with the reassurance of having “experts” who have the technical “know-how” to sort these dangerous loners out.
>
> (p255)

Analysing this passage, it is important to maintain a degree of critical scepticism towards dominant framings of autistic people as the co-authors advocate. As Chapter 3 demonstrated, autism has historically been understood primarily in psychological and biomedical terms defined and reproduced by non-autistic experts. Attempts to challenge such nominal expertise on the part of neurotypical people have been carried out by neurodiversity activists and scholars, and I view my own work in this thesis as engaging in such work. The principal mistake which Timimi et al. make in their analysis, however, is that in seeking to challenge established expertise around autism produced by neurotypical people, their own reductionist social constructionist account similarly fails to acknowledge autistic people’s diverse perspectives. In doing so, they engage in flawed form of social critique which offers an inadequate response to contemporary problems. Scholars and activists should be concerned about the ways in which dominant expertise harms those labelled as autistic, with representations of autistic people informing harmful policies and public attitudes. Biomedical representations of autistic people as inherently dangerous because they lack empathic skills can have harmful social consequences, as evidenced by recent coverage of the role of autism in incidents of mass gun violence in the USA which often blames spectacular acts of mass violence on autistic people (Solomon, 2015). Timimi et al. are right to be concerned that such framings of autistic people have problematic consequences, as autistic people are perceived as “dangerous loners” (2010, p255) on account of expert knowledge. In my view, however, the response to such dangers is not to deny autism’s existence, but instead to promote autistic people’s own voices and political organising.

Autistic people have historically had to experience the harms caused by non-autistic experts and institutions, and have in response struggled to challenge such harms and provide alternative understandings of autistic life. In my view, Timimi et al.’s work fails to engage with such struggles and the perspectives they have produced, as they believe that that exposing the myth of autism will itself address social oppression. In this way, echoing Sedgwick, I argue that the co-authors engage in a paranoid mode of critique which proves theoretically and political unhelpful when analysing dominant framings of autistic people. The emphasis upon suspicion and distrust of biomedical expertise leads the co-authors to promote a reductive and conspiratorial style form of analysis regarding the operations of the autism industry in their text. This approach fails to sufficiently analyse and challenge influential framings of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects within popular culture and scientific research. As a result, I argue that a less suspicious style of social research is required to address these topics. Work by neurodiversity scholars engaging with scientific and cultural framings of autistic experience, for example, Yergeau’s critiques of theory of mind frameworks discussed earlier in this chapter, offers more theoretically sophisticated approaches for understanding autistic experience and challenging disablist oppression.

Concluding Remarks

The selection of texts analysed in this chapter has provided an opportunity to explore the various ways in which autistic experiences of disability, gender, and sexuality are represented in mainstream texts in the UK, primarily self-help books, over the course of recent decades. All of these texts contain within them certain elements which trouble influential biomedical and psychological representations of autistic people. In turn, the texts offer a variety of ways of thinking about and framing autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects, with several texts highlighting the diverse forms of gender and sexuality prevalent amongst autistic people.

At the same time, many of the texts considered in this chapter have clear limitations. Some texts rely upon biomedical and psychological accounts of autism which ignore the role of social contexts, and thereby represent autistic people as being defined by their deficits. Others fail to adequately consider autistic people's own perspectives, or in one case outright deny autism's existence as a phenomenon. As stated earlier, the focus in this chapter has not simply been to dismiss such texts, but rather to draw attention to the problems they possess. These texts feature elements which risk promoting problematic framings of autistic people to mass audiences, elements which require critique. At the same time, my analysis has emphasised other aspects of these texts which challenge influential representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects..

A key issue that emerges within the texts explored in this chapter is the issue of autistic people's own voices, in particular those of autistic women, gender variant people, and LGBTQ people. Texts by authors such as Frith, Aston, and Nichols et al. at times overemphasise the voices of non-autistic experts and carers above those of autistic people themselves, although the latter's voices do manifest in certain parts of these texts. In contrast, the texts produced by Goodall and Hendrickx demonstrate how autistic people are capable of articulating their own experiences and needs as gendered and sexual subjects. Using the format of self-help texts, these authors offer alternative representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects, highlighting the importance of social forces in shaping autistic people's lives. Timimi et al. attempt to offer a critical and sociological account in their text, including a consideration of the role of gender in autistic people's lives, but their disregard of most autistic people's experiences and perspectives produces a socially deterministic form of analysis.

From engaging with the texts in this sample, it is clear that a consideration of a wider range of autistic people's own writings are necessary in order to adequately engage with autistic people's perspectives regarding representations of autistic gender and sexuality. Self-advocacy and neurodiversity texts which I explore in Chapter 7 provide such perspectives. Before arriving at these texts, however, I examine other influential representations of autistic people present in contemporary popular culture, journalism, and academic commentary. I now turn my attention to a notable example of a popular cultural text which focuses on autistic people as sexual and gendered subjects, namely the Netflix drama *Atypical* (2017-ongoing). In Chapter 5, I explore the ambivalent elements of this show's representation of autistic people and the implications these elements have for the lives of autistic people.

Chapter 5: Atypical Autism

Introductory Remarks

Since the late 1980s, numerous films, novels, television programmes, and personal memoirs have been produced focusing on the lives of autistic people (Murray, 2008; Hacking, 2010). In this respect, narratives about autistic people have become “a boom industry” (2010, p632), as recent decades have witnessed a proliferation of texts portraying autistic people’s lives, personalities, and behaviours across the domain of popular culture. For scholars and commentators such as Murray and Silberman (2015), the depictions of fictional autistic characters in the 1988 film *Rain Man* and the 2003 novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* have proven particularly influential in shaping popular understandings of autistic people in the Anglo-American context.

At the same time, representations of autistic people in popular culture during this period have frequently reproduced the essentialist framing of autism as an masculine condition. Across various texts, autistic people are portrayed as male geeks and savants. In this way, dominant gendered representations of autistic people frequently focus on the experiences of autistic people who are predominantly white men with a narrow set of scientific and technical interests. In this way, such representations fail to reflect the diverse lived experiences of autistic people as gendered subjects, and limit the possibilities for explorations of autistic people’s lives in popular culture.

Popular accounts of autistic people during this period have also frequently marginalised or erased autistic sexuality. In both clinical literature and popular culture, as Groner (2012) highlights, autistic people have been framed as sexually abnormal. Autistic people have been depicted as inherently asexual, or have had their sexuality depicted as deviant and threatening. Such representations fail to consider the sexual diversity present within autistic communities, and work to pathologise and infantilise autistic people as sexual subjects.

The Netflix series *Atypical* (2017-ongoing) offers a representation of autistic experience in the contemporary period which occupies an ambivalent position in relation to such pop cultural representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects. In its depiction of the struggles of autistic teenager Sam Gardener to form a relationship with a girlfriend over the course of several seasons, *Atypical* presents autistic experiences in terms which trouble and reproduce existing framings of autistic gender and sexuality. In depicting an autistic character as the protagonist of a romantic and comedic coming of age drama, *Atypical* challenges disablist representations which infantilise and desexualise autistic people. Autistic people's sexualities are presented in the show as forming a legitimate part of their personal experiences. Furthermore, the series portrays forms of disablism as being harmful to autistic people's well-being, suggesting that it is social attitudes and institutions rather than autistic people themselves which need to be changed. In these respects, *Atypical* represents autistic people in terms which reflect the neurodiversity movement's challenge to disabling social barriers and calls for social acceptance of human diversity.

In other respects, however, *Atypical's* representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects proves problematic in nature. Sam's characterisation as a technically gifted but socially impaired young man reproduces the influential framing of autism as a condition which primarily affects white male geeks, one found both in popular culture and clinical literature such as that of Baron-Cohen (2004) discussed earlier. At the same time, the series' exploration of autistic sexuality proves contradictory and troubling. *Atypical* may challenge framings of autistic people as sexually abnormal at certain points, but in other ways the series' depiction of Sam's sexuality proves pathologising or heteronormative.

In this chapter, I critically analyse the representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects within the first two seasons of *Atypical*. I have chosen to focus on the first two seasons broadcast between 2017-2018 as it is within these seasons that the major issues with the show's representations of autistic sexuality and gender prove most explicit in nature.

In my analysis of *Atypical*, I consider the ways in which historical representations of autistic people have been gendered, heterosexualised, and racialised in popular culture. I begin the chapter with a discussion of autistic people's depictions as "savants" (Murray, 2008, p23), exemplified by the 1988 film *Rain Man*, and how, as Jack (2014) highlights, autism has become synonymous with the figure of the male geek in the popular imagination. I situate such a discussion in relationship to literature on geek masculinities by scholars such as Almog and Kaplan (2015) who draw attention to the whiteness and heterosexualism of geek communities.

In addition, I discuss popular representations of autistic people's sexualities over recent decades. In doing so, I draw upon Groner's queer and crip theory analysis of autistic sexuality, which positions autistic sexuality as in conflict with heteronormativity and compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness. For Groner, such conflict renders autistic sexuality as being queer in nature.

Before turning to an exploration of the series' engagements with autistic sexuality and gender through analysis of parts of episodes from the first two seasons, I consider the show's premise in some depth. Referring to an interview with the show's creator Robia Rashid (Fernandez, 2017), I examine how the show's narrative as a coming of age drama affects the presentation of autistic people as sexual and gendered subjects, with the show structured around the protagonist Sam's development into a young heterosexual man.

As I analyse aspects of the series in depth, I draw upon the existing scholarship of Jack and Groner to demonstrate how *Atypical* reflects and challenges influential representations of autistic people. I explore the ways in which the series both troubles and reproduces the framing of autistic people as primarily being white male geeks, with Sam, in many respects, offering another manifestation of such a figure in popular culture. I examine *Atypical's* depiction of autistic sexuality, exploring the ambivalent ways in which the series affirms and pathologises Sam as a sexualised autistic character. I also deploy work by Butler (1997, 2006) on the performative nature of gender and the process of subjection to critically explore *Atypical's* portrayal of autistic people in terms of gender and sexuality.

In my analysis, I highlight aspects of the series which contest traditional framings of autistic people as sexual and gendered subjects. In my view, such elements challenge disablism and point to possibilities for autistic representation beyond established depictions, such as the representation of autistic people as primarily being male white geeks. More troubling aspects of the series are at the same time considered in depth, with a queer theory and feminist inflected critique of the show offered. Having advanced such a critique, I conclude the chapter by pointing to ways in which cultural representations of autistic people could move beyond such limitations, anticipating efforts at developing alternative forms of representation of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects which are considered in the texts featured in Chapter 7.

Savants and Geeks

Over the course of recent decades, popular cultural representations of autistic people have frequently depicted them as geek and savant figures (Murray; 2008; Arnold, 2013; Jack, 2014; Silberman, 2015; McGrath, 2017). As highlighted by several scholars, autistic people, predominantly men, are portrayed in popular media as possessing great technical knowledge and skills despite their impairments. Male autistic characters may be depicted as unable to empathise with others, or as struggling to communicate in everyday conversation, but at the same time they are shown to be great mathematicians, scientists, and technicians, with their obsessive tendencies portrayed as granting them great talents and forms of expertise. Such representations make an explicit "association between autism, maleness or masculinity, and technology" (Jack, 2014, p106), as autism is gendered as an essentially masculine condition.

The 1988 film *Rain Man* can be seen as a significant factor in the emergence of representations of autistic people as male geeks and savants in Anglo-American popular culture. In the film, Dustin Hoffman portrays Raymond Babbitt, an autistic character who displays considerable difficulties in everyday interactions. Throughout the film, Raymond engages in obsessive routines. such as watching television at specific times, and experiences severe anxiety when travelling. At the same time, Raymond is portrayed as a savant with great mathematical skills, which over the course of the film enables him and his brother to make considerable sums of money gambling. As neurodiversity scholar Larry Arnold (2013) puts it, “ever since ‘The Rainman,’ the notion of the ‘autistic savant’ has gripped the popular imagination’ (pi), whilst Murray argues that the film has become “the foundational text for...various contemporary representations of autism” (2008, p84). In Arnold’s view, “the entertainment value of the movie is predicated upon the extraordinary feats that Raymond is capable of” on account of “his autism and rare skills” (p1). Raymond may suffer from major social and communication impairments, but his autism nevertheless provides him with a considerable and almost superhuman talent.

According to several historical accounts by scholars, *Rain Man*’s release greatly influenced popular knowledge about autism as a medical condition. As Silberman highlights, the film makers consulted American research psychologist and parental advocate Bernard Rimland during the film making process, and Hoffman’s portrayal was itself informed by the behaviours of several autistic people the actor had encountered. In this respect, the film’s representation can be seen to have reproduced psychological and biomedical framings of autistic people drawn from scientific research and clinical contexts, promoting such framings to wider popular audiences. As Murray puts it, the film proved “the breakthrough story that gave the condition a public profile when before it was, to a large degree, confined to medical and educational specialists, the families of those individuals who had autism” (2008, p84). As a result of such a portrayal, “autism and savantism” have “become almost synonymous” (p65) over the course of recent decades, with autistic individuals assumed to be technically gifted and knowledgeable white men who suffer from various impairments. This form of representation has in turn been reproduced by other media texts, further circulating such a framing of autistic people as gendered subjects.

For Jack, the emergence of framings of autistic people as male savants and geeks within the domain of popular culture has been entangled with wider social and economic developments concurrent with *Rain Man*'s release and subsequent popularity. She notes that part of the reformulation of the diagnostic criteria for autism in the latter part of the 20th century, described in Chapter 3 of this thesis, involved the incorporation of Asperger syndrome into the wider category of autism spectrum disorder. As Jack highlights, Asperger's work in the 1940s linked the condition he identified in his child patients "to male intelligence" (2014, p108). She suggests that the integration of this research into the official diagnostic criteria in 1994 encouraged the gendering of autism as an inherently masculine condition.

In addition, Jack draws attention to the post-1980s prominence of the technology sector in Western economies as a factor in representations of autistic people as male geeks and savants. In her account, autistic men have become associated with narratives of "computer geeks as heroes" (p110), narratives generated by the rise of Silicon Valley in the USA and popular discussions of the post-industrial "knowledge economy" (p109). In these narratives, autism is portrayed as giving socially impaired autistic men technical skills well-suited to the contemporary information economy. A notable example of such a discourse, she argues, can be found in a journalistic account of "the geek syndrome" (p115) published by Silberman in the early 2000s. In this article, Silberman portrays autism as a prevalent condition amongst Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and employees, and speculates on the role of autism in shaping the lives of people working in the technology sector (Jack, 2014; Silberman, 2015). Jack highlights how media commentary focused on tech entrepreneurs such as Microsoft's Bill Gates and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg has, over recent decades, frequently suggested that these individuals are autistic. A 1994 *Time* magazine article, for example, attempted to diagnose Gates as being autistic, whilst several reviews of the 2010 biographical film *The Social Network* argued that Zuckerberg "had traits consistent with autism or Asperger's syndrome" (2014, p105).

Popular accounts of tech entrepreneurs being autistic have been reflected and reproduced in works of fiction during this period. McGrath (2017), for example, highlights the ways in which Douglas Coupland's 1995 novel *Microserfs*, "a satire of the Microsoft empire and a contemplation of the evolving relationship between humanity and technology" (p32), portrays geek characters as being potentially autistic. In this way, according to Jack and McGrath, journalistic and popular cultural accounts of tech entrepreneurs have played a key role in reproducing the representation of autistic people through the masculine figures of the autistic geek and savant.

Jack argues that these cultural framings of autistic people as male geeks and savants have been reinforced by Baron-Cohen's research into autism and gender. Baron-Cohen's depiction of autism as an essentially masculine condition defined by technical obsessions, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, can be seen to connect to such popular representations of autistic people. Psychological research which presents autism as an extreme male brain type gives scientific credibility to cultural framings of autistic people as male geeks, with technical expertise and knowledge on the part of such geeks ascribed to their autism.

All of these mutually reinforcing developments have, in Jack's account, produced an understanding of autistic people as being affected by "a disorder of geekiness" (2014, p114). In this way, portrayals of autistic people as male geeks have come to shape popular perceptions of autistic people's experiences. In Jack's view, such a form of representation narrowly focuses on the experiences of autistic men at the expense of those of other autistic people.

Geek Gender and Race

The emergence of popular cultural representations of autistic geeks over the last three decades can also be connected to greater public visibility of geek and nerd communities, including explorations of the roles of gender, sexuality, and race in these communities (Eglash, 2002; Kendall, 2011; Almog and Kaplan, 2015; Massanari, 2016). As Almog and Kaplan put it, "the archetype of the nerd is a white boy or young man of middle-or-upper class background"

(2015, p3), someone who is interested in computer technology and science but at the same time is ostracised by their peers. According to such scholars, nerds and geeks occupy an ambivalent social position. In certain areas, they face exclusion from social norms, for example, in terms of failing to fully meet the dominant norms of masculinity and heterosexuality. At the same time, such nerds and geeks exhibit positions of privilege, with "women and men of colour consistently excluded" (p4) from geek and nerd communities. As a result, as Massanari argues, geek culture "often demonstrates a fraught relationship to issues of gender and race" (2016, p332). She highlights, for example, how phenomena such as the 2014 misogynistic cyber-harassment #Gamergate campaign demonstrate the ways in which white male geeks engage in forms of oppression against other social groups despite their own marginalisation.

With this social context in mind, influential framings of autistic people's experiences centred around the figure of the geek can be seen to have further contributed to popular representations of autistic people as white men. Historical tendencies to associate autistic behaviours with expressions of masculinity, alongside the categorisation of autism as a disorder affecting children from white professional families noted in Chapter 3, are reinforced by portrayals of autistic people's experiences which reproduce the racialised and gendered terms of the figure of geek.

Spock Sexuality

Groner offers a critical engagement with dominant representations of autistic people's sexualities, drawing upon insights from queer and crip theory regarding the interrelationship between the dominant norms of sexuality and ability. She uses such insights to analyse a selection of texts focused upon autism, including autobiographical texts written by autistic authors. Examining explicit and implicit sexual elements featured within these texts, Groner advances a critique of what she describes as more traditional representations of autistic sexuality. For Groner, neurotypicality and compulsory heterosexuality are mutually reinforcing social forces. As a result, she argues that "autistic sexuality is illegible to heteronormativity" (2012, p265). By this, Groner means that dominant disablist and heterosexist norms and narratives marginalise autistic people's sexualities. Autistic people are framed as pathologically asexual in some accounts, whereas in others autistic people's sexualities are "depicted as abnormal," with "even a casual survey of clinical, medical, and education literature" showing "that sexual behaviours are to be discouraged or "managed" amongst autistic people" (p263). Autistic people face barriers preventing them from being able to display and explore their sexualities. Groner suggests that denials of autistic people's sexual capacities in cultural and scientific texts inform institutional restrictions on their sexual activities.

Echoing scholarship by Butler (2006) and McRuer (2006), as considered in Chapter 2, Groner argues that "compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness are always already failing systems" (2012, p265). For her, autistic people's narratives of their own sexual engagements trouble such oppressive systems. Autistic people experience difficulties trying to perform expected social norms around ability, sexuality, and gender. In this way, Groner argues, they call into question such norms. She notes, for example, the autobiographical account of autistic primatologist Dawn Prince Hughes. In this account, Hughes describes her attempts to perform feminine romantic love within the context of lesbian relationships with women by emulating heterosexual norms. Her efforts, which included asking women to marry her after casual sexual encounters, repeatedly resulted in her relationships failing and Hughes experiencing emotional distress. For Groner, autistic people's over emulation of social norms, as in Hughes' efforts to perform traditional femininity, should not be understood as the result of autistic impairments. She instead argues that autistic people's difficulties highlight the issues with these social norms. In this way, disablism becomes entwined with sexual normativity, as autistic people struggle and fail to adhere to the terms of heteronormativity and, as a result, suffer social disablement.

Based on her analysis of autistic personal accounts, Groner advances the claim that all autistic sexuality disturbs heterosexuality. Autistic sexuality "is always and necessarily queer, even if the people involved are not gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender in identity or practice," forming "a complex challenge to heteronormativity and to mainstream cultural assumptions about sex and disability" (ibid). For her, autism's positioning as "a "disability" in the sexual realm arises from a perceived failure to read and correctly perform heteronormative codes of sexual behaviour—or, from an intractable awareness of the illogic and arbitrariness of these codes" (p270). As a result, Groner suggests that autistic people can play a role in contesting compulsory heterosexuality, and in the process develop alternative ways of organising social life.

A Premise With Problems

Atypical first started streaming on Netflix in 2017 and has ran for three seasons, with a fourth series anticipated at the time of writing. In a 2017 interview published by the online magazine *Vulture*, the show's creator and main writer comedian Robia Rashid describes her initial motivation for creating the series:

> I was very aware that more people were being diagnosed with autism and it was interesting to me that a whole generation of kids were growing up knowing that they were on the spectrum and wanting independence. That point of view seemed so interesting to me—and such a cool way to tell a dating story. You've seen the story of somebody looking for independence and looking for love before, but not from that specific point of view.
>
> (Fernandez, 2017, para3)

Drawing upon familial experiences of autism and her own research, Rashid and the show's other creators devised *Atypical* as a coming of age drama centred on the experiences of autistic teenager Sam Gardner, played by Keir Gilchrist, and his wider family and friends (ibid). Sam struggles with various everyday life experiences over the course of the show, from school bullying to university applications. In particular, Sam is shown to experience difficulties forming romantic and sexual relationships with women on account of his autistic impairments. Sam is initially portrayed as unable to understand and navigate social norms associated with such relationships. The fallout from such relationship difficulties provides the emotional drama for much of the series' first two seasons, with his personal struggles intensifying other characters' crises, such as his mother Elsa's extramarital affair in season one. As the show progresses, Sam is shown to learn from such everyday struggles as he matures, with his personal relationships with friends and family improving.

Before considering specific elements of the show's episodes, it is worth critically analysing *Atypical's* premise. Such a premise, as described by Rashid in the earlier passage, fundamentally shapes the direction of the series' first two seasons. Issues regarding the representation of autistic people as sexual and gendered subjects in the series are evident in the terms of this premise. As Rashid states in the interview, *Atypical* is structured around a standard narrative of a young person's desire for independence and romantic attachment, but places an autistic character at the centre of such a narrative. In this respect, autism troubles the 'typical' coming of age narrative, allowing for an exploration of autistic people's distinct experiences.

At the same time, the established coming of age narrative referred to by Rashid remains fundamentally intact in *Atypical.* Over the course of the show's first two seasons, Sam's journey adheres to such a narrative, as he matures into an independent adult, faces family conflicts, and seeks a romantic partner. The coming of age narrative within the show is affected by the central focus upon Sam's autism, but his experiences as an autistic character are nevertheless subordinated to the terms of such a narrative. Such a narrative is one which contemporary audiences are already likely to be familiar with from their engagements with other fictional texts focusing upon the personal growth of their young adult protagonists. *Atypical* experiments with such a narrative, with Sam's depiction as someone who is autistic shaping his particular character arc throughout the drama, but for the most part the show does not radically subvert this narrative in terms of its depiction of a young man's emotional and sexual journey towards maturity. The show may play with the conventions of fictional texts associated with the coming of age genre but fundamentally *Atypical* adheres to them.

As Rashid highlights in the earlier passage, there are many autistic young people in society who want greater independence and to form sexual relationships as they grow older. In this respect, the series' premise provides space for an exploration of such autistic people's experiences and perspectives in a manner which avoids infantilising them. The association of autistic people with being childlike found in savant representations, as highlighted by Murray (2008), is in part challenged by this particular representation. Devising *Atypical* as a dating story focused on the life of an autistic character allows for a representation of autistic experience not found in wider cultural discourses, which, as Groner highlights, frequently erase and pathologise autistic sexuality. In this this sense, the show contributes a distinctive representation of autistic people's experiences in the contemporary moment, with the show's distribution on Netflix allowing it to reach a wide audience in various parts of the world, including the UK.

Atypical Heterosexuality

As established so far, an in-depth exploration of autistic sexuality forms a central component of *Atypical* as a fictional show. In centring an autistic character's sexual desires and dating experiences, the show's narrative explicitly challenges popular framings of autistic people as being inherently asexual. The series' engagements with autistic people as individuals with sexual and romantic attachments may therefore appear to the non-autistic viewer as a significant step in terms of providing representations of autistic people which are absent from other areas of popular culture. *Atypical* depicts the reality that autistic people have sexual and romantic desires, and that they, like their neurotypical counterparts, are involved in intimate relationships. The emergence of such a programme in the contemporary moment, I argue, reflects a wider shift in the cultural zeitgeist in regards to popular understandings of autistic people. As in the case of the self-help texts offering relationship advice to autistic people and their non-autistic partners explored in Chapter 4, *Atypical's* emergence as a show focused on autistic people’s sexual experiences demonstrates growing public recognition that autistic people have legitimate sexualities. In this way, such developments over the course of the last three decades appear to challenge influential disablist and heterosexist representations of autistic people present within biomedical, psychological, and popular cultural discourses. These representations, as noted so far, have frequently portrayed autistic people’s sexualities as non-existent and deviant in nature, with *Atypical*’s emergence appearing to speak back to such framings.

In practice, however, despite the potentially disruptive nature of *Atypical’s* focus, the show’s portrayal of autistic sexuality proves fairly ambivalent over the course of the first two seasons. As a show, *Atypical* simultaneously challenges established framings of autistic people’s sexual identities and experiences, whilst in other respects Sam’s portrayal presents autistic sexuality in problematic ways. An emphasis upon autistic people’s capacities as sexual agents who deserve acceptance is uneasily accompanied by troubling framings of autistic sexuality. Sam’s depiction proves extremely heteronormative in nature, with such a representation ignoring the experiences of autistic non-heterosexual people. At the same time, elements of Sam’s representation risk pathologising autistic sexuality, as Sam’s sexual desires lead him to engage in harmful behaviours.

The first minute of the show’s first episode, *Antarctica* (2017), establishes the overall thrust of Sam’s character arc as a heterosexual teenager. In a conversation with his therapist, Julia, Sam mentions how having a girlfriend would be something that he “can never do” (00:28). Julia suggests to Sam that if he wants to date he can do so, noting that “people on the spectrum date” (01:30), and suggests that he do so himself. This desire for a girlfriend proves central to Sam’s characterisation, with his decision to attempt dating generating tensions in his family throughout the first series. When Sam reveals his desire to “find someone to have sex with” (03:52) to his family at dinner, his mother Elsa is portrayed as being uncomfortable with his desires, and she subsequently criticises Julia for advising Sam to pursue dating. Elsa argues that “relationships are hard enough for neurotypicals” (10:17), declaring to Julia that she “doesn’t want to put that kind of pressure on my son” (10:20). Elsa is portrayed as overly protective of her son throughout the rest of the first season, with Sam’s increased assertiveness and open sexuality undermining her dominant role in the family as she is no longer able to determine what is best for him.

In contrast to Elsa’s hostility, Sam’s father Doug is supportive of his son’s efforts. Initially, Doug is portrayed as playing a less prominent role in his son’s life compared to Elsa. It is later revealed in episode three, *Julia Says* (2017), that in the past Doug left the family for several months as he struggled to accept Sam’s autism. Doug finds supporting Sam’s sexual and romantic interests a means of emotionally bonding with his son, enabling him to play a more prominent role as a parent. As Doug says to Sam in the first episode, he might not understand Sam’s obsessive interests, “but girls I know about” (34:45). Doug provides Sam with relationship advice and increasingly comes to play a leading role in helping Sam over the course of the first season, with Sam turning to him rather than Elsa for support.

As the series progresses, Sam’s efforts to find a sexual and romantic partner frequently fail or result in problems for himself. In the first episode, *Antarctica*, for example, Sam’s attempt to strike up a sexual encounter with a girl goes wrong. His initial over-exaggerated attempt at catching her attention through smiling proves off putting, whilst his attempted sexual encounter fails on account of his sensory issues and her disablism. Attempting to follow Doug’s advice at the end of the first episode that he should find “someone who appreciates you for what you are” (35:28), Sam decides that he should ask Julia to be his girlfriend. Sam’s subsequent attempts to court Julia provide much of the dramatic material of the first season. After a discussion with Doug at the end of the second episode, *A Human Female* (2017), in which Doug tells Sam not to pursue Julia, he decides that he needs “a practice girlfriend” (30:13) so that he has the necessary experience to ask Julia out. After a period of initial reluctance, he finally decides to ask Paige, a student at his school who tries to be friends with him, to be his girlfriend in episode four *A Nice Neutral Smell* (2017). Sam does not disclose his motives for asking her out to Paige, and their relationship proves strained owing to his annoyance at her overbearing nature. Convincing himself that he is truly in love with Julia, Sam publicly breaks up with and humiliates Paige in the season's finale *The Silencing Properties of Snow* (2017). His declaration of love to Julia, however, goes horribly wrong as Julia angrily rebukes him, causing Sam to experience an emotional breakdown. At the end of the episode, Sam is able to repair his relationship with Paige and, in the process, have an intimate encounter with her at the silent disco she organised for him.

In the second series, Sam and Paige undergo a difficult form of reconciliation as she initially attempts to "keep things casual" (05:30) as she puts it in the second episode *Penguin Cam and Chill* (2018). This effort falters on account of her emotional needs, with their friendship further strained by Sam's intimate encounters with the school bully Bailey Bennet. In the season's concluding episode, *Ernest Shackleton's Rules for Survival* (2018), however, Paige stands up for Sam after he suffers emotional distress from disablist bullying. In the process, Paige loses her voice from angrily shouting, and Sam volunteers to publicly read her school graduation speech. Afterwards, Sam tells Paige that "I realised that I think the reason I gave your speech is that I'm in love with you" (29:19-29-24), and the pair resume dating for the rest of the show.

Critical Atypical

The portrayal of Sam's autistic sexuality in the first two seasons of *Atypical* proves ambivalent in my view. Such a portrayal challenges disablist representations of autistic people as sexual subjects, whilst at the same features elements which can be critiqued from a neurodiversity standpoint for presenting other problems.

In certain respects, Sam's desire to become a sexual young man whilst being autistic is portrayed in affirmative terms throughout the series. As discussed earlier, *Atypical* contests framings of autistic sexuality in terms of infantilisation and deviancy. Sam is portrayed as an openly sexual character who matures over the course of the show, with his relationship with Paige portrayed as a positive one. Characters who bully, discourage, and reject Sam on disablist grounds are portrayed as antagonists. The show demonstrates the various ways in which autistic people face social and cultural barriers which physically and psycho-emotionally disable them, including the stigmatisation and denial of disabled people's sexualities. The audience is clearly meant to sympathise with Sam as he faces rejection, and when his own misguided efforts to forge relationships fail or have harmful side effects. Sam's panic attack at the end of season one following Julie's rejection offers the most notable example in which viewers are encouraged to sympathise with him.

In a similar way, Elsa's efforts to stop Sam from seeking sexual relationships are depicted as part of her wider infantilisation of Sam. She is portrayed as an overly controlling parent, with her efforts to intervene in his life depicted as unhelpful and harmful. In turn, the support offered by other characters such as Doug, Sam's sister Casey, his workmate Zahid, and Paige are portrayed in more positive terms. Sam's family members and associates are shown to want him to live a more autonomous life as an autistic young person and to find fulfilling relationships. In particular, although their relationship is strained over the first two seasons, Sam's relationship to Paige is fundamentally a positive one. As described earlier, Sam realises at the end of the second season that he really is in love with her and as a result learns to treat her in a respectful manner. In turn, Paige accepts him for who he is as an autistic person.

I argue, however, that viewing *Atypical* as a purely affirmative representation of autistic people's sexualities ignores more troubling elements within the show. Indeed, it is questionable at certain points in the show whether *Atypical* adequately represents autistic people's sexualities in a manner which challenges disablist framings. In certain respects, the show speak back to negative depictions of autistic people's sexualities, and thereby encourage social acceptance of autistic people in a way which reflects the neurodiversity movement's aims. At the same time, *Atypical's* portrayal of Sam includes elements which are worth critically analysing. In certain ways, the show can be critiqued for reproducing the pathologisation of autistic sexuality, whilst the affirmative portrayal of autistic sexuality offered by the show proves heteronormative in nature. In this way, such a portrayal fails to fully and critically engage with the problems of societal discrimination against autistic people.

Persistent Pathologisation

Sam's actions towards Julia and Paige in the first two seasons prove troubling, with the show's resolutions inadequately redressing the harm caused. In turn, the show's portrayal of such harmful behaviours in personal relationships as the results of his autistic impairments can be critically analysed.

Sam acts insensitively towards Paige over the first two seasons, ignoring her, dismissing her, and as noted above, publicly ending their relationship in a humiliating manner. One of the most notable example of Sam's questionable treatment of Paige can be found in episode five of the first season, *That's My Sweatshirt* (2017). After school, Paige comes home with Sam and begins to touch his personal belongings in his bedroom, causing him personal annoyance. When she decides to pick up his pet tortoise Edison, Sam orders her to not "snuggle Edison" (08:04) and locks her away in a cupboard. Sam is forced to let her out after Doug discovers what he has done. When Doug asks Sam to apologise for his actions, Paige intervenes in his defence, saying "It's ok. I know from my research that sometimes people with ASD have outsized reactions to stuff" (08:42-08:44) and that she let Sam temporarily detain her so that he could "recharge his batteries" (08:53).

Paige's acceptance of Sam's actions in episode five on the grounds that he is autistic illustrates a broader issue regarding the show's representation of Sam as an autistic person. The show seems to suggest that autistic people inherently act in harmful ways in personal relationships, with Sam's character development over the first two seasons, in turn, suggesting that autistic people can mature and come to act more 'normally.' Such a portrayal of autistic people is questionable, with this depiction of autistic people's actions in sexual and intimate relationships proving to be pathologising in nature. As shown in the above example, Sam's actions towards Paige appear deliberately callous and cruel. The show nominally encourages a message of acceptance of autistic people's differences when it comes to their engagements in sexual and intimate relationships, but in doing so presents autism as a disorder which inevitably causes harmful or potentially even abusive behaviours in such relationships. In this way, *Atypical* inadvertently represents autistic people to non-autistic people in negative terms. Indeed, *Atypical's* portrayal of autistic people echoes elements of the representations present in the relationship guides considered in Chapter 4. As discussed earlier in my analysis of Aston's 2014 text, such texts can encourage non-autistic partners to view relationship difficulties as the result of their partners' impairments. *Atypical* similarly depicts autistic impairments as causing problems in relationships, with Sam's autism preventing him from fully understanding the needs of other people, including his girlfriend Paige. The show simultaneously promotes acceptance of autistic people, whilst suggesting that their impairments should be viewed as the negative cause of relationships difficulties.

This unintended pathologisation proves more explicit in the representation of Sam's relationship with Julia. Sam appears troublingly obsessive in his interactions with her in the first season. His attempts to court her, for example, involve breaking into her house in the second episode, *A Human Female*. Sam's interference in Julia's life inadvertently leads to the breakdown of her own romantic relationship by the season's concluding episode. In this way Sam's autistic behaviours can be seen to cause considerable emotional distress for his therapist.

I argue that the representation of Sam's relationships with Julia and Paige troublingly emulate narratives of autistic sexual deviancy and threat. There appears an unintended implication in the show that autistic people's sexual behaviour are problematic and threatening, with Sam's sexual obsessiveness and mistreatment of several characters reinforcing the longstanding stigmatisation of autistic sexuality. Indeed, Elsa's fears in the show that Sam is unsuited for sexual and romantic relationships on account of his autism do not appear unreasonable considering the emotional and physical turmoil induced by Sam over the course of the two seasons. Elsa's portrayal as a controlling figure who needs to stop interfering in her son's life is therefore undermined, as the fallout from Sam's actions suggests to viewers that her concerns are legitimate. In this way, concerns around autistic people's sexualities may be seen to be encouraged by the show. The portrayal of Sam suggests that autistic sexuality may indeed be "inappropriate or potentially harmful to others" (Groner, 2012, p263).

In making these arguments, I am not suggesting that depicting a selectively positive portrayal of autistic people's experiences in interpersonal relationships would necessarily offer a more accurate representation of autistic sexuality. Depicting autistic people's struggles with sexuality and intimacy is important in terms of shifting narratives around autistic sexuality from the pathologising framings highlighted by Groner. My primary argument, rather, is that *Atypical's* attempt to depict the complexities of autistic people's intimate and sexual relationships inadvertently proves stigmatising, with autistic impairments depicted as causing harm to non-autistic people.

Performing Heterosexuality, Queering Atypical

As described earlier, Groner suggests that autistic narratives play a role in queering understandings of sexuality. In certain respects, *Atypical's* narrative plays such a role. For the most part, however, the show produces problematic heteronormative framings of autistic sexuality which foreclose queer possibilities. The show attempts to offer an affirmative portrayal of autistic sexuality, but does so by offering a depiction of autistic heterosexuality. In this way, the show encourage acceptance of autistic people as sexual subjects through the normalising force of heterosexuality. *Atypical* may to an extent operate as a queer narrative, illustrating the difficulties experienced by autistic people engaging with gendered and heteronormative social norms and practices, but in the end such narrative possibilities are hindered by an emphasis on the redemptive power of heterosexuality. Such an emphasis thereby marginalises potentially “neuroqueer” (Walker, 2015, para1) elements, in which non-heterosexual autistic people's sexualities could be explored and heteronormative and disabling social norms called into question.

Overall, Sam’s character development can be primarily understood in terms of coming to embody a particular kind of heterosexuality and masculinity as a subject. Doing so involves engaging with existing sexual and gendered norms and practices. As Butler (1997) highlights, such ““subjection” signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (p2). In this respect, Sam’s characterisation in the show undergoes this dual process, as his coming of age as a sexual young adult involves engaging with and operating within terms of existing gendered and heterosexual power. Sam tries to follow advice on how to adequately perform heterosexuality from the social environments and cultural materials around him, seeking the advice of friends and family in order to improve his heterosexual and masculine conduct. In *Julia Says,* for example, Sam tries to buy new clothes in order to make himself appear more attractive to women, with his workmate Zahid encouraging him to wear a leather jacket on the grounds that such clothes “are chick magnets” (15:27). Heterosexuality and masculinity appear citational in a Butlerian sense, with Sam’s efforts to achieve correct performances of masculine heterosexuality tied to an emulation of neurotypicality. As Zahid puts it to Sam when the latter objects that the leather jacket he puts on “doesn’t feel like me” (15:37), “You’re trying to get girls. The last thing you want to be is yourself” (15:40-15:44). In this way, the interrelationship between the performance of ‘normal’ sexuality and ‘normal’ ability, identified by McRuer and Groner, are clearly at play in such a representation of autistic experience.

Sam often struggles with gendered and sexual norms and frequently fails to adhere to them. In some cases, he misunderstands such norms, whilst in other cases he follows them too literally. His decision to break into Julia’s house, for example, comes as a consequence of Zahid suggesting that he give Julia chocolate covered strawberries in order to seduce her, with Sam deciding that he should personally deliver these strawberries to her. Such a hyper-performance of heterosexuality is in keeping with accounts of autistic people’s attempts to literally emulate the norms of heterosexual coupledom. As Groner suggests, such efforts reveal the limits of such heteronormative codes through overt identification. In this way, Sam’s confusion regarding the underlying logics of dating as a result of his autistic impairments highlights the arbitrary nature of heterosexual norms and practices. His experiences in the show illustrate the issue of double empathy highlighted by neurodiversity scholarship (Milton, 2012a), with Sam's difficulties understanding sexual norms and practices established by neurotypical people demonstrating how autistic people's difficulties are shaped by societal forces.

These potentially queer elements of the show fail to be fully realised. In the end, *Atypical* advances a representation of autistic heterosexuality which reinforces contemporary heteronormativity and disablism. Sam's effort to emulate correct heterosexuality are portrayed positively, with such efforts allowing him to bond with his father and become a more independent individual over the course of the first two seasons. Sam's relationship with his dominant mother is partially de-centred as a result of this connection with his father, one made possible by his emulation of heterosexuality. In this way, Sam's impairments are portrayed as having prevented familial bonding, with his maturity into a heterosexual young man able to restore such a relationship.

Similarly, although there are strains in their relationship, the relationship between Sam and Paige allows him to become more autonomous. His decision to read her school graduation speech in front of a public audience at the end of the second series clearly demonstrates this, as Sam breaks with his previous social isolation. In these ways, the other characters' acceptance of Sam as he develops his sense of self through youthful masculinity and heterosexuality is reflected on another level by the audience's presumed acceptance of Sam on similar grounds. A message of autistic acceptance predicated on the basis that autistic people are just like non-autistic people because they too can be heterosexual and gender normative appears to be at play here. Sam's narrative ultimately reinforces a sense that heteronormativity is desirable, with Sam's "desire for the norm" (Butler, 1997, p19) in terms of emulating heterosexuality and masculinity enabling him to mature and be socially accepted. Contrary to Groner's analysis, in *Atypical* heterosexuality renders Sam's autism legible within current cultural terms, with Sam ultimately following normative standards determined by heterosexuality and ableism in contemporary culture (Campbell, 2009).

Such a critique is not intended to suggest that *Atypical* uncritically promotes heterosexism against LGBTQ people. In fact, the character development of Sam's sister Casey over the course of the second season would appear to directly challenges this reading. Casey develops sexual attraction to her school friend Izzie and comes to realise that she is bisexual. This character arc is portrayed sympathetically, with Elsa accepting Casey's sexuality and revealing that she herself is bisexual in the episode *Ernest Shackleton's Rules for Survival.* Such a portrayal promotes an affirmative message to viewers that society should be more pluralistic and accepting of diversity, including non-heterosexual sexualities.

At the same time, viewers may be left with the troubling implication that in *Atypical*'s narrative the acceptance of autistic people, including their sexualities, is contingent on them inhabiting the terms of heteronormativity. In this respect, whilst some autistic straight people may find their own experience reflected in the show, I argue that the portrayal of autistic sexuality in *Atypical* remains ambivalent and potentially troubling.

Sam as Geek

Sam's characterisation in many respects fits into the mould of the masculine geek figure present in historical cultural representation of autism described earlier in this chapter. Sam works in a technical hardware shop throughout the show, and is obsessed about Antarctica, displaying an in-depth knowledge of historical and scientific facts about the region and the creatures that inhabit it, particularly penguins. Metaphors of isolation and distance associated with this region are frequently deployed to illustrate Sam's experiences of loneliness as an autistic person, as well as highlighting his specialist and obsessive tendencies. Sam often invokes discussions of these topics in his internal narration and dialogue, as he make points about issues such as romantic relationships and family dynamics to the other characters and the show's viewer. In the episode *A Human Female*, for example, Sam rationalises his decision to find a practice girlfriend, which he calls "the logical thing to do" (30:25), with a reference to the Antarctic explorer Roald Amundsen “taking several practices over easier terrain” (30:23) before embarking on his major expedition. In this way, Sam is depicted as understanding sexual relationships through his own scientific obsessions, with his autistic perspective leading him to analogise scientific exploration with intimate interactions.

Sam’s scientific behaviour extends to carrying out research and assessments of those around him in order to make decisions. In episode four, *A Nice Neutral Smell*, for example, Sam decides to write a “pros-and-cons list to figure out if I like Paige” (14:55-14:58), noting her various behaviours and attributes in order to rationally assess whether he should be in a relationship with her.

Over the course of the first two seasons, Sam is depicted as being a gifted artist, filling a scrapbook with detailed illustrations of wildlife, landscapes, and people. Characters including Paige encourage Sam to recognise his skills. In the second season, such encouragement motivates Sam to apply for an art course at university in episode eight *Living at an Angle* (2018) which will allow him to professionally draw such designs.

In his depiction as a socially isolated figure with specialist scientific knowledge and a unique talent, Sam appears another prominent example of the autistic savant figure. He fits the archetype of an individual who experiences many deficits in key aspects of life in comparison to his neurotypical peers, whilst at the same time possessing special gifts. As in the case of other autistic characters noted by Jack, Sam’s autism is portrayed as a form of geeky masculinity which grants him great skills. In this way, *Atypical* provides viewers with another example of autistic representations in terms of the figures of the geek and savant. In doing so, it is possible that the show attempts to make Sam a more easily understood character to the audience by deploying familiar tropes associated with autistic people in popular culture. Presenting the autistic protagonist as a geek arguably enables viewers to easily comprehend Sam’s initial characterisation before he displays unfamiliar elements, for example, in terms of his growing romantic attachments.

In other respects, *Atypical* counters the framing of the autistic male brain type associated with representations of geeks, a framing which suggests that autistic people have difficulties with emphasising with others. Sam grows to properly care for those around him others, for example, learning to treat Paige better as the show progresses, culminating in his actions at the graduation speech described earlier. In these ways, whilst the show partially reproduces an influential masculine portrayal of autistic people found in scientific literature and popular culture, the show to an extent subverts such a portrayal. *Atypical* shows Sam to be more than just the figure of the geek, suggesting to viewers that autistic people's experiences as sexual and gendered subjects are more multifaceted than influential framings have traditionally suggested.

Overall, however, the show's predominant focus on Sam as a male geek figure as a means of representing autistic people suffers from limitations. Presented as an autistic geek, Sam's characterisation embodies long established associations of autism with masculinity, heterosexuality, and whiteness. Reproducing this figure may render Sam's autism legible to non-autistic viewers, but it does so in a manner which produces a problematic representation of autistic experience. In this way, viewers are given a portrayal which fails to adequately represent the diverse nature of autistic populations.

In the second series there are efforts to present a more diverse range of autistic character through Sam's membership of an autistic peer group at school (Patton, 2018). First encountered in episode three *Little Dude and the Lion* (2018), the group features autistic characters who are women and people of colour. Such characters, to an extent, de-centre the role of savant and geek framings elsewhere in the narrative. The character of Amber, a young Black autistic woman who cares for Sam, for example, contests the depiction of autistic people as lacking in emotional empathy prevalent in popular cultural discourses. Fearing that Sam will "die penniless and alone" (17:35) if he becomes an artist, Amber steals his art portfolio in episode eight *Living at an Angle* (2018) so that he is unable to submit his designs as part of the university application process. Her mother Megan explains this decision to Doug by saying that “Amber has a lot of empathy. A lot” (17:31-17:33). The portrayal of Amber, who unlike Sam is played by an autistic actor, partially contributes to a more diverse representation of autistic people within the show (Patton, 2018). Amber’s characterisation as an extremely empathic Black young woman is clearly distinct from the figure of the white male geek unable to empathise with others, a figure Sam’s portrayal at times reproduces elsewhere in the first two seasons.

The issue remains, however, that the show’s primary representation of autistic people is through the depiction of Sam as the protagonist, who proves the most explored autistic character within the show. The other autistic characters play relatively minor roles in terms of the show’s narrative, and do not receive much screen time in the second season. It is the portrayal of Sam in terms of the autistic male geek figure which primarily seeks to influence the audience’s perception of what it means to be an autistic person, as the show is fundamentally centred upon his experiences. Sam’s autistic characterisation is heavily racialised, gendered, and sexualised in terms of the male geek figure, providing viewers with what can be critiqued as a rather narrow account of autistic experience. This is not to claim that non-autistic audiences cannot develop more multifaceted and intersectional understandings of autistic experience from *Atypical* as a show, including around aspects of sexuality and gender. Nonetheless, the show’s representation of autistic life within the first two seasons remains, for the most part, limited and open to critique.

Concluding Remarks

Atypical as a text offers audiences an ambivalent representation of autistic people as sexual and gendered subjects. *Atypical*, in certain respects, speak back to influential pathologising and marginalising depictions of autistic sexuality, with framings of autistic people as inherently asexual and sexually deviant contested by the show’s exploration of Sam’s intimate relationships. Furthermore, although the show reproduces the figure of the masculine autistic geek, Sam’s characterisation in certain areas breaks with this commonly deployed figure. As the show has progressed, a more diverse range of representations of autistic experiences has come to be depicted in terms of gender and race. The show explicitly promotes an inclusive message aimed at non-autistic audiences, namely that autistic people, however atypical they may appear, are the same as other members of society, and that social disablism is harmful to such people. The show in this respect offers a message in line with the neurodiversity paradigm, suggesting that autistic people should be socially accepted and have their differences recognised as legitimate.

In many other respects, however, *Atypical's* representations appear flawed in terms of engaging with autistic people's experiences as gendered and sexual subjects. By its very nature as a show centred upon the coming of age drama of a white heterosexual geeky autistic young man, *Atypical* reproduces elements of influential framings of autistic life which can be seen as limited and harmful. Sam's characterisation remains trapped within the terms of savant and geek figures, and in this respect the show fails to develop a more expansive framing of autistic people's experiences.

Furthermore, whilst the show's efforts to explore difficulties facing autistic people in terms of sexual development and gender performance challenge pathologising framings of autistic people, the actual portrayal of autistic sexuality in the show is troubling. Sam's actions often appear to reinforce the notion that autistic sexuality is defective, as he emotionally harms those around him in his efforts to assert his sexual identity. In turn, the show's message regarding acceptance of autistic sexuality relies upon a very heteronormative narrative. The show may to an extent demonstrate the limitations of the dominant terms of heterosexuality and disablism through Sam's stressful engagements with them, but in the end *Atypical* appears to suggest that autistic sexuality can be integrated into the existing terms of heteronormativity.

In these various ways, *Atypical* as a show offers a portrayal of the interrelationship between autism, sexuality, and gender in autistic people's lives which re-inscribes normativity. Autistic people are represented in a manner which challenges disablism whilst simultaneously reinforcing it. *Atypical* depicts autistic life in a way which seems to be accepting of those who are different from the norm, whilst at the same struggling to engage with neurodivergence outside of formulations which remain infused with heteronormativity, masculinism, and disablism. The show thereby fails to "form a complex challenge to heteronormativity and to mainstream cultural assumptions about sex and disability" (Groner, 2012, p265), at a moment when a more diverse range of representations of autistic experience are desperately needed within popular culture.

The contradictory elements of *Atypical* as a show can, in my view, be read as symptomatic of the current conjuncture when it comes to struggles around neurodiversity. The fact that a show like *Atypical*, which is concerned with the sexuality of an autistic protagonist, has entered the Anglo-American cultural mainstream provides evidence for the growing prominence of neurodiversity perspectives which challenge dominant harmful framings of autistic sexuality. In this way, the show imperfectly reflects increased demands for autistic acceptance, including acceptance of autistic people's sexualities.

At the same time, *Atypical* marks the limits of popular framings which have historically been produced by non-autistic people, from scientific papers to fictional films. Such framings offer partial and pathologising accounts of autistic experience, with the focus on the figures of the geek and savant demonstrating that autistic people only prove legible if they adhere to established norms around masculinity and heterosexuality.

In the end, Sam is a character who, despite some subversive elements, nevertheless reflects influential representations. The show's implicit message that autistic people are the same as the presumed non-autistic viewer, and that they should therefore be accepted, remains dependent upon autistic people fitting into particular social and cultural terms. As this thesis demonstrates, such terms, reflected in framings of autistic people as male geeks across various texts, are increasingly being called into question by autistic people. Struggles to improve conditions for autistic people and to expand possibilities for autistic gender and sexual expression contest popular representations of autistic people in terms of heteronormativity, geek masculinity, and sexual deviancy, representations which *Atypical* reproduces in the first two seasons.

In my view, more explicitly neuroqueer fictional narratives regarding autistic people's experiences could popularise alternative forms of autistic representation capable of critiquing current configurations of gender, sexual and disablist power. In making this argument, I do not disagree that *Atypical* as a drama in certain ways does productively contest influential framings of autistic people, or deny that autistic and non-autistic viewers can derive joy or greater understanding from watching episodes of the show. At a time when autistic people continue to face various forms of oppression, and greater visibility of autistic people has generated hostility and concern, *Atypical* does present some challenges to disablism. Overall, however, *Atypical* as a show has clear limits in its approach, and the development of other forms of autistic representation which can enter popular culture proves necessary in order to challenge continued disablism.

In Chapter 6 I shift my focus away from popular cultural representations of autistic people towards an analysis of media representations of autistic gender variant people. In doing so, I examine the growing visibility of such people in popular discourses, and critically examine the perspectives of various commentators who have participated in debates regarding their visibility.

Chapter 6: (Autistic) Childhood and Its (Gendered) Discontents

Introductory Remarks

Over the course of the last three decades, greater attention has been paid in scientific research and popular media reporting to connections between autism and gender variance. Scientific studies produced since the late 1990s in various countries, including the USA and UK, have highlighted cases of individuals exhibiting symptoms of both autism spectrum disorders and gender dysphoria (van Schalkwyk, Klingensmith and Volkmar, 2015). At the same time, there has been increased visibility of individuals who define themselves simultaneously as being autistic and gender variant (Bumiller, 2008; Jack, 2014; Burns, 2017; Urquhart, 2018). Such developments have encouraged medical professionals, journalists, and academics to speculate on the potential causal connections between these categories. Greater visibility has been interpreted by some observers as symptomatic of underlying problems, with apparently greater numbers of people being identified as autistic and gender variant treated with suspicion. Concerns have been raised by commentators that autistic people's impairments have created a situation in which children and young people are being wrongly diagnosed as experiencing gender dysphoria.

In this chapter, I analyse controversies surrounding autistic gender variance, and argue that such controversies have taken on the character of a moral panic (Cohen, 2002). Such a moral panic, frequently expressed in terms of protecting vulnerable autistic young people, reproduces what I characterise as problematic framings of autistic people. In my view, such framings should trouble those who are influenced by the neurodiversity paradigm and movement. Representations of autistic youth as the passive victims of harmful gender ideologies reinforce forms of infantilisation and pathologisation which autistic people have historically been subjected to. Moreover, possibilities for autistic self-advocacy to be connected to wider feminist and LGBTQ struggles are foreclosed in such narratives, which present autistic people and gender variant people in antagonistic terms. Autistic children and young people, I argue, have their voices marginalised in such a panic, as medical professionals, parents, educators, and feminist critics claim to speak on their behalf.

At the root of such a panic, I argue, are contestations over the meanings of childhood, disability, and gender in autistic people's lives. The panic emerges within a context where established framings of these issues are being challenged by increasingly visible forms of self-advocacy on the part of historically marginalised populations. Navigating and confronting these contestations makes it possible to develop a more nuanced and sociological account of gender variance as an aspect of contemporary autistic life.

To analyse such phenomena, I begin the chapter with an extensive exploration of the background to this panic. Such an exploration encompasses the infantilisation of autistic people, the increased visibility of trans people in the public sphere, concerns about rising diagnostic rates of autism, and finally scientific and media analysis of co-occurrences of autism and gender variance in people's lives.

In the latter part of this chapter I consider a range of texts in depth, namely the BBC Two Films documentary *Transgender Children: Who Knows Best?* (2017), the academic collection *Transgender Children and Young People: Born In Your Own Body* (2018) edited by Heather Brunskell-Evans and Michele Moore, and the self-help text *Gender Identity, Sexuality and Autism: Voices from Across the Spectrum* (2019) by Eva A. Mendes and Meredith R. Maroney. Situating these texts within the wider controversies, I examine how such distinct texts frame autistic gender variance in people's lives. In doing so, I draw upon work by scholars such as Kafer (2013) and Slater (2015) which both highlight the connections between disability, sexuality, and gender variance and, at the same time, advocate for political coalitions between marginalised groups.

The texts featured in this chapter are critically examined for the ways in which they reproduce pathologising and infantilising framings of autistic people as being primarily defined by their deficits. I draw attention to the reductive account of autistic impairments as the cause of gender dysphoria in young people present within several of these texts. I argue that the framings of autistic gender variant people produced in these texts have harmful implications for autistic people, and as a result critique them from a neurodiversity standpoint. In turn, I highlight how the topic of autistic gender variance can be engaged with more productively, through an emphasis upon autistic people's own perspectives and experiences. I suggest that contributions from autistic gender variant and LGBTQ people featured in Mendes and Maroney's collection offer examples of such productive engagements. Such contributions reject the pathologisation and infantilisation of autistic gender variant people, and instead frame gender variance as forming a legitimate aspect of autistic people's personal identities. Personal accounts from these autistic contributors point to better ways of representing and analysing these issues, ways which are further explored in the analysis of autistic self-advocacy literature in Chapter 7 of this thesis.

Autism and Childhood

As highlighted in Chapter 3, there has been a long-standing historical association between childhood and autism. As a diagnostic label, autism emerged from the analysis of abnormal children. Despite shifting understandings of autism's causes and characteristics within scientific research and popular culture over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, autism continues to be negatively framed as a childhood disorder (McGuire, 2016; McGrath, 2017).

As noted in Chapter 3, Sinclair (2012) offers a critical analysis of the ways in which the portrayal of autism as a childhood disorder is associated with trauma and distress for families. For Sinclair, such experiences of grief are not directly caused by "the child's autism in itself," but rather are the consequence of "the loss of the normal child the parents had hoped and expected to have" (p1). Sinclair argues that treating "the child's autism as a source of grief" proves harmful for neurotypical parents and autistic children, and urges "parents to make radical changes in their perceptions of what autism means" (ibid). Articulating a neurodiversity perspective, Sinclair emphasises that wider social attitudes, norms, and institutions harm autistic people, including children. Autism itself is not inherently problematic. The cultural expectations around normal childhood form part of the wider configuration of social forces which disable autistic people. Children are expected to develop and behave in certain ways, with autistic children who fail to do so viewed negatively by neurotypical people. Parents and carers who cling onto such cultural expectations, Sinclair suggests, contribute to autistic people's oppression. Abandoning such expectations would therefore prove beneficial to autistic people. As Sinclair writes, "grief over a fantasized normal child needs to be separated from the parents' perceptions of the child they *do* have: the autistic child who needs the support of adult caretakers" (ibid).

Sinclair's work parallels the theoretical work outlined in Chapter 2 regarding the figure of the Child. The autistic child, like other disabled children, signifies an "undesirable future" (Kafer, 2013, pp2-3) for families and wider society. If "the child is an adult in the making" (Castañeda, 2002, p1), with normal maturity shaped by heteronormativity and compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness, then autistic children who fail to develop in normative terms are inherently defective. As McGuire puts it:

> Autism…is framed as that risk which may…potentially divert the normative, productive course of a time-rich child by causing them to squander their temporal wealth: by "wasting" or "losing" temporal riches with the rigid inefficiency of "developmental delays," by arriving late (or not at all) to milestones and so to productive and consumptive futures.
>
> (2016, p132)

This framing portrays autistic children as tragically having had their identities and futures stolen from them by their disorder, preventing them becoming normative able-bodied/able-minded subjects. In this way, the symbolic figure of the able-minded, neurotypical Child invalidates autistic children's lived experiences. Autistic children are represented in pathologising terms, as children who must be cured of their disorder in order for normative development to take place. In Slater's terms, autistic people fail to live up to the standards of "Mr Reasonable" (2015, p2), the ableist and heteronormative ideal which people are expected to embody in contemporary neoliberal society.

The framing of autism as being damaging to children is closely connected to the infantilisation of autistic people in society. As Slater argues, "disabled people today remain rooted in childhood discourse" (p45), and I would argue that the association of autism and childhood described so far results in autistic people being understood as lacking in agency.

These infantilising portrayals of autistic people, portrayals which narrowly focus on the effects of their deficits, have come to play a significant role within contemporary popular accounts of autistic people's gender variance.

Autism and the Transgender Tipping Point

Recent decades have witnessed the increased cultural visibility of trans people's experiences and struggles in various parts of the globe (Puar, 2015). In 2014, *Time* magazine declared that legislative change and popular cultural representation had resulted in a "transgender tipping point" (Steinmetz, 2014, para1), despite the persistence of transphobic oppression. Increased trans visibility has included coverage of the lives of trans youth, with a 2017 *National Geographic* article focused on the experiences of gender non-conforming children across different societies offering one notable example (Conant, 2017). As Gill-Peterson (2018) highlights, affirmative media coverage of trans children coexists alongside violence directed at "trans childhoods—and, so much more specifically and insistently, black trans and trans of colour childhoods, nonbinary trans childhoods, low-income trans childhoods, and undocumented trans childhoods" (pviii). Echoing theorists such as Edelman (2004), Gill-Peterson notes that "the delusional adoration of the rosy figure of the Child abuts the most heinous quotidian modes of violence in the lives of real children," as such children are rendered "vulnerable by the force of law, the deprivation of their economic earnings, and the infantilisation of their personalities" (ibid). There may be greater attention paid to trans children and other gender variant youth by media outlets, with such attention offering up "the figure of the trans child as emblem of a new and futuristic generation," but trans people nevertheless continue to suffer considerable violence, particularly "black trans women and trans women of colour" (p2). In this way, experiences of transphobic oppression remain prevalent despite the inclusivity of certain forms of trans media representation.

Against this wider backdrop of trans visibility and transphobic violence, there has been growing interest over the last two decades in potential connections between autism and gender variance. Analysis of such connections can be found in both pieces of clinical literature and popular media accounts. These texts, which particularly focus upon gender variant young people, often understand autism and gender variance in terms of defects and disorders. Following the diagnostic criteria outlined in the DSM and ICD, autism is understood in terms of interrelated intellectual, communication, and social impairments, as detailed in Chapter 1. At the same time, gender variance is understood through the diagnosis of gender dysphoria, although such a diagnosis has been partially de-pathologised in recent years (Schwend, 2020).

In their overview of clinical literature focused on autistic gender variance, van Schalkwyk, Klingensmith, and Volkmar (2015) draw attention to a range of case-based accounts and studies published over recent decades which focus upon "gender-related concerns and autism spectrum disorders" (p81). Such literature, they suggest, indicates an apparent comorbidity between autism and forms of gender dysphoria. One study, for example, suggests that "the incidence of ASD appears to be higher in "gender dysphoric" individuals than in the general population" (ibid). Another study cited by the co-authors, namely one by de Vries et al. (2010), examines data on children and adolescents referred to a gender identity clinic, including cases of suspected autistic youth. de Vries et al.'s study itself notes that "in all cases described, the diagnostic procedure was extended to disentangle whether the gender dysphoria evolved from a general feeling of being "different" or a "core" cross gender identity" (p935).

As van Schalkwyk, Klingensmith, and Volkmar highlight, throughout such clinical literature one finds considerable speculation regarding the extent to which autistic impairments shape "gender identity formation" (2015, p81). Works of clinical literature frequently imply that autistic obsessive behaviours and thinking may be responsible for nominal gender dysphoria in the cases of many patients. In this respect, autism is portrayed as causing gender variance in people's lives.

A notable example of clinical literature proposing such a hypothesis can be found in Jones et al.'s study *Brief Report: Female-To-Male Transsexual People and Autistic Traits* (2011). Co-authored by several academic researchers and medical professionals, including Baron-Cohen himself, the study draws upon the extreme male brain framing of autism, referred to as "the EMB theory," in order to analyse trans people and people with "Autism

Spectrum Conditions (ASC)" (p301). The study seeks to "test the specific prediction from the EMB theory that transmen will have more autistic traits than typical women, and that a higher proportion will score in the ASC range for autistic traits" (ibid). The report compares scores from five groups using Baron-Cohen's questionnaire, the Autism Spectrum Quotient, namely "transmen (female-to-male transsexual people)…transwomen (male-to female transsexual people)…typical males…typical females and…individuals with Asperger Syndrome (AS)" (ibid). The report reproduces Baron-Cohen's framing of autism as a masculine condition, declaring that because "females with ASC are hyper masculinised in specific aspects of behaviour and cognition, it may well be that they identify more readily with the other sex" (pp301-302). Citing studies which indicate that autistic girls display "masculinisation in choosing toys that do not require pretend play," along with studies showing that autistic women "report higher rates of tomboyism in childhood" (p302), the authors propose the following hypothesis:

> Females with ASC may therefore feel that they don't belong in a typical female peer group and in a minority of cases it may even lead to develop Gender Identity Disorder (GID). An elevated number of autistic traits would confer a rigidity on their perceived gender identity, similar to that which is observed in individuals with persistent GID from childhood to adulthood.
>
> (ibid)

Analysing the data gathered from their study, the co-authors suggest that "the study confirms clinical case studies and reports in adolescents and children that genetic females with Gender Identity Disorder (GID) have an increased number of autistic traits" (p304). The co-authors of the report respond to this data by speculating on the causes of their findings, offering readers the following possibility:

> We speculate that this increased number of autistic traits is likely to have made the transmen (in their childhood and adolescence) less able to assimilate in a female peer group, instead gravitating towards males. This may also have led to difficulties in

> socialising in a female peer group, and a feeling of belonging more in a male group, thus increasing the probability of GID.
>
> (ibid)

The co-authors suggest that trans men, who they view as “chromosomally female individuals, who have felt masculinised since childhood” (p305), display autistic traits in such a way as to suggest that it is autism, rather than gender dysphoria, which is the potential cause of their gendered difficulties. Jones et al. argue that this insight can help to inform professional medical practices in cases of dysphoria. In this way, the co-authors suggest that autism is possibly responsible for causing gender variance, with trans men in fact autistic women who have developed dysphoria as a result of their impairments.

“Comorbidity” Coverage

Journalistic commentary regarding the connections between autism and gender variance has brought these clinical debates into the wider public sphere, thereby increasing the visibility of autistic gender variant people. In an article for the US-based online magazine *Slate*, for example, journalist Evan Urquhart (2018) highlights that “that there is a growing consensus in the medical community” that diagnoses of autism and gender dysphoria “co-occur at disproportionate rates” (para1). Urquhart speculates that such a correlation may be the result of biological factors causing the emergence of transgender identities, or alternatively “that autism is overrepresented amongst trans youth because autistic people are less concerned with social norms and less likely to bow to social pressures that keep other trans people from coming out” (para5). He considers the hypothesis “that autistic people’s gender dysphoria is really an overfocused interest in gender” (para6), but at the same time highlights professional commentary which considers this an insufficient explanation. Both medical expertise and autistic self-advocacy are cited as affirming the existence of co-occurrence as a phenomena which should be recognised by professional services for both trans and autistic youth.

A 2016 article by science writer Deborah Rudacille for *Spectrum*, an American online publication focused on autism research, similarly explores the connections between autism and gender variance. Informed by both clinical studies and personal stories investigated by the author, the article highlights the co-occurrence of diagnoses amongst individuals, and reports on the potential causes of such phenomena proposed by researchers. Explanations for such co-occurrence include the possibility that "children with autism might be less aware of social restrictions against expressing gender variance," that autistic people's "rigid black-and white thinking" may be leading them "to believe that they are not the sex they were assigned at birth," or that some as yet unknown "biological connection" (para20) is responsible. Rudacille highlights the lived experiences of autistic gender variant youth in the USA, discussing how self-advocate Jes Grobman campaigns against the failures of medical provision to meet the needs of trans autistic people. Grobman is presented as being "less concerned about the causes of the autism/trans overlap than about building a society that does not punish difference" (para22). At the same time, Rudacille highlights parental concerns regarding dual diagnoses, describing cases of parents who have been reluctant to accept both diagnoses in their children. One such case involved "Kathleen and Brad" (para42), parents who had fought for greater school support for their autistic child, but who were subsequently reluctant to accept their child coming out as trans.

Panic

Within the UK, the apparent connection of autism to gender variance amongst children and young people has received considerable scrutiny from major media outlets. Such coverage has often manifested in hostile forms. Two online news articles from 2018 published by *The Mail On Sunday* offer notable examples of such coverage. Entitled "*Autistic children given sex change drugs by the NHS: Up to 150 youngsters treated with puberty-blocking jabs "might not even be transgender""* (2018a) and "*School has SEVENTEEN children changing gender as teacher says vulnerable pupils are being "tricked" in to believing they are the wrong sex*" (2018b), both articles are written by the newspaper's Social Affairs Correspondent Sanchez Manning. Drawing upon accounts from educational and medical professionals, the articles paint a disturbing picture of a crisis in which autistic young people are being fast-tracked through unnecessary medical procedures. Unable to properly understand their own identities on account of their impairments, autistic youth are portrayed as being manipulated by a range of actors, from transgender political campaigners to medical professionals at the London-based Tavistock Clinic. The two texts reproduce the causal connection between autism and gender dysphoria speculated on in the clinical literature described earlier, framing such a connection in negative terms. The former article, for example, focuses on how one report "found that a third of those referred to the Tavistock Clinic in London have strong signs of autism" (2018a, para4). Manning notes how "just one in 100 of the general population is thought to be autistic" (ibid), framing the number of apparent autistic referees in such a way as to question the validity of them being authentically transgender. The article presents concerns from various medical experts who fear that these young people "might not be transgender at all" (para1). These experts instead suggest that such young people have been misdiagnosed on account of their autism.

In such articles, autistic youth are primarily depicted in terms of their vulnerability. They are portrayed as the passive victims of "a powerful transgender lobby" (Manning, 2018b, para6), a lobby which convinces them to understand their personal experiences of identity crises through the terms of gender dysphoria. In turn, the lobby is portrayed as silencing professionals trying to protect autistic children. One source quoted by Manning in the second article, for example, declares that they "believe that autistic children who are not transgender are being exploited by the transgender lobby. They are being brainwashed into believing they are transgender" (para46).

Manning's articles may be particularly rhetorically charged in nature, but the concerns expressed within them are prevalent in British publications across the political spectrum. A 2019 piece in *The Observer*, for example, highlights the concerns raised by a governor at Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust regarding the clinic's services for trans children and youth (Doward, 2019). The governor suggests that the services had failed to "fully consider psychological and social factors" (para7) which might motivate young people to seek medical interventions, portraying autism as one such factor. Several critical articles on trans politics by the feminist journalist Sarah Ditum for *The New Statesman* (Ditum, 2016a, 2016b) in recent years similarly make passing references to the potential role of autism in causing apparent experiences of gender dysphoria amongst young people.

As such examples highlight, it is not only explicitly socially conservative publications such as *The Mail on Sunday* which have platformed concerns regarding the relationship between autism and gender variance in cases of young people, but also publications associated with liberal and centre left standpoints. The ideological frameworks informing such concerns may be distinct between publications, in some cases reflecting moral conservativism whilst others reflect radical feminist stances, but such pieces all share the concern that the co-occurrence of autism and gender variance in young people is a problem which needs to be addressed. Such coverage emerges within a wider set of controversies and contestations surrounding gender and sexual politics in the contemporary period, in which British media outlets have frequently been accused of promoting prejudice against trans and non-binary people (Allen, 2018; Fae, 2018; Gleeson, 2018; Levin, Chalabi and Siddiqui, 2018).

The sociological framework of moral panics proves useful for critically analysing such hostile coverage of gender variant autistic youth. As Cohen puts it in his examination of the causes and growth of moral panics:

> A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in styilized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media…socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) restored to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.
>
> (2002, p1)

For Cohen, “the body of information” which shapes people’s analysis of social problems are “invariably received at second hand” (p2). Such coverage presents social problems and solutions in ways which are “further structured by the various commercial and political constraints” (ibid) which media outlets operate within. Furthermore, as Cohen highlights “the media might leave behind a diffuse feeling of anxiety about the situation” being covered, with “such vague feelings…laying the ground for further enterprise” (p10) on the part of various social actors. Such dynamics produce concerns around social issues which lead to widescale panic, generating demands from various actors for action to be taken to resolve the problems.

I argue that contemporary concerns around the increased visibility of autistic gender variant young people in the UK can be understood as a moral panic in Cohen’s sense. Within this panic, autistic gender variant youth are portrayed in pathologising terms by commentators, even in cases where critics adopt stances nominally opposed to biomedicalization, with the mass media promoting such framings and thereby amplifying concerns. Popular perceptions of autistic gender variant youth are, in this way, shaped by coverage received by wider audiences who are unaffected by the direct experiences of these young people. Cumulative media coverage of rising numbers of trans children and youth, coverage which portrays autistic impairments as the cause of such an increase, generates anxiety amongst sections of the population. Such coverage, in turn, provides opportunities for concerns to be amplified and reproduced by different actors, including journalists, academics, and medical professionals, who encourage “the agents of social control” (p89) to take action to address such concerns.

It is clear from the examples cited so far that recent media coverage of autistic gender variant youth portrays them in hostile terms. Autistic impairments are blamed for youth being wrong identified as gender variant, whether this be the result of professional negligence, as suggested in Doward’s 2019 article, or the manipulation of trans activists, as suggested in Manning’s coverage from 2018. Efforts to affirm the validity of autistic trans and non-binary variant young people’s identities are framed as misguided or ideological in nature. As with other panics, “folk devils” (Cohen, 2002, p3) are identified in such coverage. Transgender people are portrayed as sinister activists who manipulate autistic youth into thinking that they themselves are trans, causing them to seek medical interventions to unnecessarily modify their bodies. These trans activists are, in turn, depicted as censoring people's legitimate concerns around the accuracy of diagnoses and the suitability of these medical interventions for young people. At the same time, neurotypical parents and professionals who refuse to accept that children and young people are both autistic and gender variant are positively represented within such coverage. Concerns expressed by these groups about manipulation and medical negligence in apparent cases of autistic gender variant youth are depicted as being legitimate in nature.

In this contemporary moral panic, autistic children are not only portrayed as individually at risk, but their apparent susceptibility to abnormal ideas and practices regarding gender is depicted as posing wider problems for society. Such coverage may not portray autistic people as requiring cures, as in the curative imaginary discussed by Kafer (2013) in Chapter 2, but such coverage nevertheless denies autistic young people possibilities for articulating and affirming their own experiences as gendered subjects. Commentators may call for the protection of autistic youth from the threat of the trans lobby, but in doing so they communicate a message to their audiences that these young people cannot be trusted to understand their own personal identities. Manifestations of gender variance in young people are, in this way, implied to be the result of autistic impairments, and are therefore presented as being inauthentic in nature. As a result, autistic people are further infantilised, gender variance is demonised, and the authorities are encouraged to take action to address the problem.

Roots of the Panic

In my view, the underlying roots of the moral panic surrounding autistic gender variance can be understood through a comparison with the widespread narrative which frames autism as an epidemic negatively affecting children. Such a narrative, which has played a prominent role in anti-vaccination politics in recent decades (Silberman, 2015), shares several aspects with the ongoing panic around the growing public visibility of autistic gender variant youth.

As noted in Chapter 3, historical shifts regarding the diagnostic criteria for autism have resulted in growing numbers of autistic people being identified in various parts of the world. Such a numerical shift, accompanied by increased cultural recognition of autistic people as highlighted in Chapter 5, has been framed by some observers as indicative of underlying problems. Autism is not only framed as a medical disorder and personal tragedy for individuals and their families in such a narrative, but is portrayed as symptomatic of other problems, such as the use of unsafe vaccines by medical professionals on children (Hacking, 2006). Andrew Wakefield's 1998 research paper suggesting a causal relationship between the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine and cases of autism in children has played a key role in generating parental concern and media panic around growing numbers of people being diagnosed as autistic over recent decades (Silverman, 2012; Silberman, 2015). In this case, an apparent cause of autism was identified which could be held responsible for the rise in diagnoses, framed as an epidemic in popular discourses (Eyal et al., 2010). In turn, such a narrative of causation and proliferation has led to the blaming of individuals in positions of authority, namely medical officials and politicians, who have been depicted as failing to protect children from the effects of unsafe vaccinations. The anti-vaccine narrative has therefore come to play a significant role in shaping in popular discourses surrounding autistic people, despite the professional discrediting of Wakefield's research.

The narrative of autism as an epidemic caused by unsafe vaccinations is one that explicitly relies upon wider cultural imaginaries and concerns to sustain it. The figure of the Child discussed earlier in this thesis re-emerges once again, as concerns regarding the survival of the healthy and normal Child inform the epidemic narrative. Children must be protected from the threat of unsafe vaccinations, and by extension the threat of autism as a disorder, leading to the rejection of the vaccine and significant distrust of expertise which suggests that it is safe.

I argue that this framework of autism as an epidemic caused by vaccinations shares elements with the moral panic around autistic gender variant youth. Greater visibility of trans and non-binary youth is understood as a problem by various social actors, from parents and medical professionals to conservative journalists and radical feminist campaigners. Autism, understood in pathologising terms as a medical disorder which makes children and young people vulnerable to being wrongly identified as gender variant, functions as the underlying problem. Whereas, in the epidemic narrative, the MMR vaccine is seen as the problem causing children to become autistic, in this contemporary panic autistic impairments are themselves characterised as the problematic root cause of gender variance in young people. The need to protect such autistic children from being wrongly identified as gender variant motivates those with concerns to take action and promote their perspectives. If autism is behind the increased visibility of gender variance in young people, then this legitimises efforts to question the authenticity of such gender variance, and to challenge public entities, such as clinics which offer medical interventions for trans people, on the grounds that they are harming autistic young people. Parents and professionals are encouraged to be suspicious of the accounts of autistic gender variant youth, who can be understood as being incorrect about their identities on account of their impairments, or indeed be viewed as having been indoctrinated by trans campaigners. Trans campaigners calling for greater educational and medical service provision for young trans and non-binary people are therefore portrayed as a threat to the health and safety of autistic young people.

The current conjuncture within the UK in regards to matters of gender and autism has provided ideal conditions for such a panic to emerge and grow. Autistic people continue to be treated with suspicion and concern, even as institutional efforts to encourage inclusivity, such as the 2009 Autism Act (Evans, 2017) and self-advocacy struggles have shifted attitudes to an extent. Similarly, trans and non-binary people face considerable discrimination, with inadequate health care provision (Fae, 2018) and hostile media coverage (Allen, 2018). It is therefore unsurprising that as the experiences of these two groups have become visibly entangled within the cultural mainstream that coverage should manifest in such hostile terms. In turn, the panic around the relationship between autism and gender variance in the lives of children and young people has reinforced existing concerns and hostility. Autistic people are further pathologised and infantilised, as autistic people's gender non-conformity is characterised as symptomatic of their impairments. Gender variant people, meanwhile, are further delegitimised, as trans and non-binary people have their experiences portrayed as inauthentic. Such experiences can be dismissed by critics as the result of autism. Those who understand themselves as simultaneously autistic and gender variant have their personal identities invalidated. Such individuals are infantilised as a vulnerable group incapable of understanding their own experience. The panic suggests that these young people must therefore be protected from themselves by responsible parents and professionals.

Documented Controversy

The BBC Two Films documentary *Transgender Children: Who Knows Best?* (2017) explores the increased visibility of gender variant youth by presenting such phenomena in terms of controversies around the medicalisation of childhood and contestations over the meaning of gender. The documentary can be viewed as a key text within the ongoing moral panic around autistic gender variant young people, with autism playing a significant role in the programme's narrative. The segment discussing autism may only take up a few minutes of the documentary's total hour-long running time, but the framing of autistic people in this segment significantly shapes the documentary's portrayal of gender variance in young people. This segment represents autism and gender variance in young people's lives in pathologising and infantilising terms, generating concerns which further contribute to the wider moral panic.

As a documentary film produced and distributed by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), *Transgender Children: Who Knows Best?* nominally offers viewers impartial reportage on matters regarding trans health care provision. The documentary primarily focuses upon debates regarding trans health care provision in Canada, with the documentary discussing psychologist Kenneth Zucker's opposition to gender affirmative approaches for supporting trans youth. The show seeks to provide viewers with information regarding these issues, for example, by incorporating interviews with notable figures involved with these debates into the film in order to present their contrasting perspectives to viewers. Some participants are shown to support affirmative approaches, whilst others such as Zucker are shown to be far more critical. In this way, the film functions like other news documentaries which reply upon talking head interviews and investigative reporting to present summarised and accessible account of events which mass audiences of viewers can learn from.

Even before its initial broadcast in the UK by the BBC, however, the documentary itself faced considerable controversy. Articles in various publications such as *The Guardian* (Ellis-Petersen, 2017) and *Nursery World* (Otte, 2017) highlighted trans advocates' concerns over the upcoming documentary's contents. The campaigning organisation Trans Media Watch filed an official complaint criticising the documentary's approach to the subject matter, accusing the BBC of failing to meet its own editorial guidelines in producing and broadcasting such a documentary (Trans Media Watch, 2017). As trans feminist journalist Jane Fae puts it, "many in the trans community objected to the false dichotomy the programme pushed of activists vs scientists" (2018, p48), viewing the programme as biased in its sympathetic portrayal of critics of gender affirmative approaches to trans health care. For trans viewers such as Fae, the documentary presented such critics as unfairly victimised for their outspoken views against trans health care, as opposed to offering an objective and impartial account of the realities of trans people's experiences of health care provision.

From the beginning, the documentary portrays trans children in terms of parental perspectives and societal concerns, with the opening narration stating that "we are now told to believe children and support them changing gender" (00:48-00:50) and that consequently "parents face terrifying choices" (01:31). In this way, trans children serve as objects of inquiry within the documentary, as the film details and explores the anxieties of parents and medical professionals who are sceptical of the value of trans affirmative health care and indeed question the legitimacy of young people's experiences of gender variance.

The relationship between autism and gender variance in young people's experiences is explicitly discussed midway through the documentary. During a discussion of a case study involving a parent named Dalia, whose child had come out to her as a trans girl, the narrator highlights Zucker's approach to such cases. The narrator remarks that "Zucker believes that a whole range of psychological issues can manifest themselves in a child's obsession with changing their gender" (27:14-27:22). In this way, rather than accepting a child's claim to be gender variant, Zucker's approach seeks alternative explanations for such identification on the part of the child. Zucker illustrates his approach by detailing a case study in which he attributed a child patient's desire to identify as a boy to the psychological effects of witnessing their mother's murder. The documentary makers proceed to explicitly discuss cases of autism in children, as the narrator offers the following remarks accompanied by footage of young girls playing:

> There is also evidence of a link between gender dysphoria and autism. One study found that children with gender dysphoria are seven times more likely to be on the autistic spectrum than children from the general population.

Zucker is subsequently shown making the following argument on camera in response to this narration:

> It's possible that kids who have a tendency to get obsessed or fixated on something may latch onto gender.
>
> (28:24-28:53)

Having advanced such a possibility, the documentary returns to discussing Dalia's case. Echoing Zucker, Dalia speculates that there are alternative reasons for her child's identification as a trans girl, such as her child being gay or suffering from past trauma. The documentary makes no explicit references to autism again after this segment.

As can be seen, the documentary engages with the connection between autism and gender variance in young people's lives fairly briefly, dedicating less than a minute to discussing this issue within the context of an hour-long programme. Despite the limited nature of this engagement, I argue that the segment focused upon autism plays a significant role within the documentary's wider narrative. The discussion of autism forms part of the documentary's wider exploration of Zucker's disaffirmative approach to cases of gender variant children. In this way, autism is offered as another explanations for trans identification in children, with the segment explicitly drawing a comparison between autism and the effects of trauma. The documentary does not treat autism as legitimately forming part of children's identities, as a neurodiversity account would, but rather frames autism as a set of biomedically problematic behaviours centred on obsessiveness. In this way, neither the narrator nor Zucker grant autism much critical engagement as a subject matter. Autism is framed purely as a disorder which can potentially cause children and young people to fixate on gender thereby resulting in experiences of personal confusion. The effects of autistic impairments on an individual's sense of self are portrayed as being equivalent to those of severe trauma, with both causing children to incorrectly identify as gender variant.

In my view, the documentary makers' inclusion of autism functions as an opportunity to insert another argument against providing gender affirmative therapy for children and adolescents. This aspect of the programme plays a major role in shaping the documentary's wider framing of health care for gender variant youth. Rather than offering a considered analysis of the experiences of autistic gender variant youth, the documentary superficially explores the connections between autism and gender variance in order to strengthen the programme's message that gender affirmative treatments for young people should be questioned. The representation of autistic youth put forward by the documentary's narrator and Zucker, namely that they are affected by a biological disorder which results in them being confused about their gender, reinforces their pathologisation and infantilisation.

Furthermore, the documentary offers no alternative perspective on the relationship between autism and gender variance apart from Zucker's pathologising analysis. In other parts of the documentary there are limited discussions of some of the issues raised, with Zucker's hostile views on trans health care and civil rights contrasted with those of other professionals. In the segment discussing autism, however, the speculation offered by Zucker and the narrator goes unchallenged. Alternative perspectives, whether they be from professionals, parents, or autistic gender variant people themselves, are absent. In this way, the documentary simply echoes the voices of biomedical professionals and parents who are sceptical of young people being both autistic and gender variant.

In addition, the inclusion of footage of children playing whilst the documentary advances the arguments described so far plays upon reproductive and rehabilitative futurist concerns regarding the figure of the healthy and normal Child discussed previously. Such a figure, signified by the playing children, is framed as under threat from the disorders of autism and gender variance. The voices of actual gender variant and autistic youth do not feature in any meaningful form, with the documentary communicating the message that it is dissident professionals such as Zucker who really know what is best for them.

Transgender Children: Who Knows Best? presents itself as opening up debates, but in reality the documentary sets these debate on limited terms which reinforce disablist framings of autistic people as incapable of knowing their own experiences. The documentary may not call for a rehabilitative approach involving the curing of autistic young people, but I would argue that the framing of autism as a disorder which causes gender variance, in practice, echoes the pathologising terms of the curative imaginary. The emergence of autistic impairments and gender non-conformity in children are presented as problematic in nature, as threats to the health and safety of normal children. In these respects, the documentary reproduces wider disablist notions which "posit young disabled people outside of adultist gender intelligibility" (Slater, 2015, p112). Autistic youth are "positioned as childlike" (ibid) in the documentary and pathologised for their impairments. In doing so, *Transgender Children: Who Knows Best?* encourages anxiety regarding gender variant and autistic youth. The documentary's exploration of the Canadian situation suggests to British viewers that Zucker's concerns should worry them and inform how British families and medical professionals approach gender variant youth on a personal and institutional level. In this way, the documentary contributes to the growth of the moral panic in the UK.

Critique and Infantilisation

Published in 2018, the essay collection *Transgender Children and Young People: Born In Your Own Body,* edited by Heather Brunskell-Evans and Michele Moore, features a range of authors deploying various approaches to analyse the phenomena of trans children. The collection is published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, with the company's website describing it as an "independent academic publisher, committed to providing a forward-thinking publishing service that champions original thinking" (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021, para1). In this way, the text follows the form of an academic essay collection, featuring a series of pieces written by authors from different professional backgrounds and areas of expertise all focused upon a primary subject matter. Such an academic format can be seen to grant the text a degree of credibility in terms of its presentation of particular arguments regarding gender variance and young people. At the same time, the text's association with an independent publisher, as opposed to an official academic publishing house, may impact the judgements of readers.

As the co-editors put it, the essays in the collection contest what they refer to as "transgender ideology" and argue that "transgender children *don't exist*" (p2) (italicised in original). They acknowledge that some people may have legitimate experiences of gender dysphoria, but at the same time they argue that the transgender label is a historically produced category which is now being imposed on children. The contributors portray trans theory and politics as reinforcing traditional gendered norms and patriarchal social relations, whilst viewing themselves as a silenced minority, censored for their efforts to critique "transgenderism" (ibid).

The phenomena of gender variant autistic young people is only featured briefly in the collection, but, as in the case of the 2017 BBC documentary, autism plays a significant role in informing the text's wider message. The most extensive engagement with autism and gender variance in young people's experiences can be found within a contribution entitled "*The*

Transgender Experiment on Children" by Stephanie Davies-Arai, an author associated with educational provision. In this contribution, Davies-Arai decries what she characterises as the dominant discourses regarding trans visibility and health care provision. She presents higher rates of diagnoses of gender dysphoria as being the result of harmful social factors, such as pornography and social media, on the self-perception of young women. In turn, she criticises transgender activists and charitable organisations for engaging in a "sustained campaign to promote a new ideology of "gender identity"" (2018, p16), and for promoting allegedly harmful biomedical interventions. So-called transgenderism is a “social contagion,” equivalent to disordered eating and self-harm, with the author portraying children and young people as being indoctrinated into the “new gender orthodoxy” (p30) promoted by trans campaigners. As in Manning’s articles referred to earlier, such campaigners are portrayed as folk devils in Davies-Arai’s narrative.

Davies-Arai includes an analysis of autistic children and young people’s experiences in this contribution, with a section of the chapter dedicated to “The betrayal of autism spectrum children” (ibid). Citing evidence from the parental advocacy group Transgender Trend, a group opposed to gender affirmative approaches in education and health care, Davies-Arai expresses horror at the co-occurrence of autism and gender dysphoria amongst half of the children referred to the Tavistock Clinic in the recent past. In turn, she advance the following set of claims:

> No adolescent is mature enough to understand that they are being indoctrinated into identity and “queer” politics, nor able to predict the reality of a lifetime on the medical path, which even the “gender specialists” don’t know. Autism spectrum adolescents, who struggle to understand social rules, are particularly vulnerable to the literal thinking behind the belief that if you have feminine personality traits you are a girl, and especially susceptible to the rigid thinking that will keep them stuck in a “trans” identity once they have been taught to define themselves as such.
>
> (p30)

Davies-Arai further develops her argument through a case study drawn from a 2016 Channel 4 documentary focusing on trans youth, in which a young autistic person is shown seeking to gender transition. For her, the primary reason for this young person's transitioning is a desire to escape the bullying that they have received for failing to perform gender in line with social norms. Such a failure to perform gender is, according to Davies-Arai, the result of the young person's autism. Transitioning is therefore a misguided effort to avoid being bullied, rather than an expression of the young person's authentic transgender identity.

This section of the text concludes with the author suggesting that "children diagnosed as on the autism spectrum and all other special needs children, along with those who are troubled or have experienced trauma or sexual abuse" are falling victim to "transgender orthodoxy" (ibid). Such orthodoxy means that teachers are forced to accept that growing numbers of children are authentically transgender, when in reality such vulnerable neurodivergent children have been indoctrinated by trans campaigners.

Davies-Arai's arguments explicitly frame the experiences of autistic gender variant youth in the terms of the contemporary moral panic. As in the 2017 documentary analysed earlier, autism is portrayed as having a monocausal relationship to gender variance, as autistic impairments result in young people wrongly identifying as gender variant. Vulnerable on account of their obsessive tendencies and social impairments, such young people have unwittingly been indoctrinated into transgender orthodoxy. As a result, autistic youth and other vulnerable young people have to be protected from dangerous ideologies, namely transgender identity politics and queer theory, and from gender transitioning, which Davies-Arai views as unsafe. Professionals and parents are encouraged to intervene in order to protect autistic children from the trans agenda of ideological dogmatism, censorship, and unsafe medical procedures.

In my view, Davies-Arai's arguments, which she presents as critical of biomedicalization and oppressive gender norms, prove rather troubling when considered in terms of alternative perspectives within disability studies and feminist theory. Davies-Arai's arguments depict trans politics as an orthodoxy which harms autistic youth. She and her supporters, in turn, understand themselves as a beleaguered and silenced minority, with their critics simply reproducing the dangerous orthodoxy which they seek to undermine. In contrast, I would suggest that Davies-Arai’s stance regarding the relationship between autism and gender variance in young people’s lives reproduces harmful framings of autistic people.

Davies-Arai’s defence of autistic children and youth, despite her ostensible critique of forced biomedicalization against them, can be seen to rely upon psychological and biomedical representations of autistic young people. For Davies-Arai, adolescents who claim to be trans or non-binary are simply indoctrinated, with autistic youth particularly vulnerable to such indoctrination as a result of their impairments. Trans politics are portrayed as a harmful force which comes to influence autistic youth, in the same way that online disordered eating communities encourage young people to behave in dangerous and unhealthy ways. It is undeniable that young people’s capacities to make rational and autonomous decisions are affected by their age, and that this is true in the case of autistic youth. At the same time, however, Davies-Arai’s framing of autistic young people as hyper-vulnerable on account of their impairments and age denies them any meaningful capacity to understand themselves as gendered subjects.

In my view, the portrayal of autistic people as the passive victims of indoctrination, with parents and professionals being encouraged to dismiss their claims that they are gender variant, results in disabling conclusions not only for autistic gender variant youth, but autistic people in general. If an autistic young person’s literal thinking makes them vulnerable to gender identity politics, for example, then this logic would appear to extended to other beliefs that they might adopt as they develop their sense of self. Davies-Arai may claim to be seeking to support autistic youth, but her framework reproduces forms of pathologisation and infantilisation which autistic people already suffer from. As a result, autistic young people have their own voices marginalised. Such a framework directly harms those who are autistic and gender variant, who have their experiences dismissed, and reinforces a disabling logic regarding autistic youth. Once again efforts to protect children, symbolically positioned as vulnerable and in need of protection in order to remain healthy and normal, prove detrimental to the lived experiences of children and youth marginalised by contemporary social environments shaped by disablism and gender normativity.

Davies-Arai's depiction of autistic and gender variant people as being in conflict with one another can be contrasted with alternative disability studies perspectives. Disability scholars such as Kafer and Slater and Liddiard (2018) have recently encouraged alliances between disabled people and LGBTQ people. Such scholars, as discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, highlight the interconnected and intersectional nature of matters surrounding gender, sexuality, and disability. Dominant social norms and institutions often marginalise multiple groups of people, with some experiencing intersecting forms of such oppression. In contrast, Davies-Arai's text portrays autistic people as being opposed to trans and non-binary people, with the former represented as the victims of the latter. Gender variant people are portrayed as manipulating vulnerable autistic people, taking advantage of their impairments in order to indoctrinate them. Such a framing can be seen to contribute to the wider marginalisation of gender variant people in the contemporary moment. Despite being presented as a challenge to social oppression, Davies-Arai's text reinforces existing forms of oppression for autistic and gender variant people, particularly people who identify with both categories. In my view, it is theoretically and politically more productive to consider the experiences of these groups in a spirit of solidarity. Davies-Arai's framework encourages greater parental and institutional control over autistic people, whilst negatively characterising gender variant people, rather than emphasising the shared struggles of these groups against oppressive norms and institutions in the contemporary moment.

Portrayals of autistic people in pathologising and infantilising terms which form part of the current moral panic around autistic gender variant youth threaten autistic self-advocacy in my view. This panic presents a particularly acute threat to such advocacy on the part of autistic gender variant people. In certain respects, Davies-Arai's arguments share the limitations of the arguments advanced by Timimi et al. (2010) which I considered earlier in Chapter 4. As in that case, a supposedly critical set of professional and political perspectives are offered as a means of challenging harmful biomedicalization, in the former case autism as a label, in this case gender variance. In practice, however, such perspectives hinder rather than support efforts to meaningfully challenge social problems, marginalising the voices of the groups being oppressed. As Slater and Liddiard suggest, despite the arguments of trans-exclusionary scholars and activists, there is a shared concern with the limits of biomedicalization in both disability and trans theory and politics. Rather than dismissing trans and non-binary people's political advocacy as being predatory and dogmatic in nature, I argue instead that alliances between forms of gender variant and autistic advocacy against institutional mistreatment are worth pursuing. Such alliances would prove particularly beneficial to people living within both sets of categories, and that neurodiversity scholarship and activism should inform and draw upon such coalitional work.

Affirmative and Therapeutic

Gender Identity, Sexuality and Autism: Voices from Across the Spectrum (2019) by Eva A. Mendes and Meredith R. Maroney, published through Jessica Kingsley Publishers, provides affirmative accounts of the experiences of autistic gender variant people. In this way, the text offers a response to the representations that are prevalent within the contemporary moral panic. Whereas the previous texts featured in this chapter dismissed the experiences of autistic gender variant people, portraying gender non-conformity as a consequence of autistic impairments, this text draws upon personal accounts to explore how individuals experience autism and gender variance. In this way, the collection encourages greater social acceptance of neurodiversity and gender diversity.

Unlike the previous texts featured in this chapter, which primarily express the views of non-autistic experts and commentators, Mendes and Maroney's text relies upon the accounts of autistic gender variant people themselves. The book explicitly centres their voices, granting them a platform to discuss their experiences. The co-authors may themselves have clinical and therapeutic backgrounds and formulate the text in terms of a self-help book for their audience, but at the same time they consciously provide a space for autistic people to articulate their own experiences as gendered and sexual subjects. In doing so, the co-authors avoid speaking on behalf of autistic people in a way which marginalises their perspectives.

The inclusion of a foreword in the book by trans autistic writer Wenn Lawson illustrates this emphasis on platforming autistic gender variant people's voices. Lawson's contribution to the book, in turn, explicitly rejects the critical framings of autistic gender variant people present in texts such as Brunskell-Evans and Moore’s collection. Challenging representations of autistic people’s impairments as the root cause of youth’s “gender or sexuality considerations,” Lawson declares that “the point is, if you don’t listen to our stories and journey with us, we may never know” (2019, p9). Emphasising an autistic self-advocate’s perspective, Lawson challenges the dynamics of infantilisation and institutional disbelief which face autistic gender variant people. He argues that “there’s something amiss about needing “Others” to be the authority over this aspect of our lives, to be the authority who gives us permission to be ourselves” (ibid). In this way, whilst the text is written by clinicians, it offers a space to explore the experiences of autistic gender variant people in a less pathologising manner than other texts featured here. The text therefore speaks back to disabling representations of autistic gender variant people as gendered subjects.

For Mendes and Maroney, cases of overlap between “being autistic and LGBTQ” (p19) should not be automatically regarded with suspicion. Based on their own research, they dispute “the idea that individuals with autism, even adults” are “unable to adequately understand their sexual orientation and gender identity” (p22). The co-authors argue that such an idea encourages medical “gate-keeping and barriers” (ibid) which prove harmful to autistic gender variant individuals seeking medical treatment.

In a Question and Answers section featured at the end of the book, the co-authors discuss the struggles of autistic gender variant people to be recognised and to receive adequate professional support. Mendes argues that although “it may be true that ASD may delay an individual’s understanding or acceptance of their gender identity and sexual orientation,” this does not fundamentally challenge the fact that “an autistic person still knows who they are and who they’re attracted to” (p161). In this way, the writers further contest infantilising framings of autistic gender variant people which inform medical provision for these people, framings reproduced in the texts considered earlier in this chapter.

In addition, the co-authors explicitly align themselves with the perspectives and goals of the neurodiversity movement. The text prioritises the voices of autistic people “in conversations on gender identity and sexual orientation with ASD adults” (p26). The co-authors declare that the book is intended to help those who are “on the autism spectrum and also have divergent gender and sexual orientation identities” (ibid). They further emphasise the positive value for autistic gender variant youth in finding accepting communities of those similar to themselves, such as online support groups. In these ways, the text promotes affirmative framings of autism as an aspect of people’s identities, and encourage resistance to disablism on the part of neurodivergent people. In this way the co-authors are able to avoid some of the limitations of the self-help genre noted in Chapter 4 of this thesis in terms of non-autistic expertise being privileged above autistic people’s own voices. The text may be formulated and distributed as a self-help book, but nevertheless it provides readers with a politicised account of autistic people’s experiences as gendered and sexual subjects which emphasises their own agency.

The voices of gender variant autistic people who are featured in the text frequently and explicitly reject infantilisation. Cliff, who describes himself as a trans autistic man, declares that “when people treat me like a child, or they assume I won’t understand something, it makes me furious” (p56). Similarly, Yaeli makes the point that they “definitely feel like people must have some image in their head of someone who is less capable” (p87) when they reveal to others that they are an autistic person. In these ways, the autistic people platformed by the text challenge pathologising framings which portray them as childlike and incapable as a result of their impairments, framings which contribute to their disablement. Far from being impaired to the point of not knowing their own experiences, such accounts demonstrate that autistic people are capable of recognising and critiquing social conditions which disable them.

Furthermore, the autistic people featured in the text challenge hostile attitudes towards autistic people’s gender variance and non-normative sexualities. Such contributions from autistic people understand gender variance, non-heterosexual sexualities, and autism as legitimate and intersecting aspects of people’s lives, contesting framings which pathologise these aspects. Cliff notes that non-autistic people often “make assumptions that people who are autistic shouldn’t be able to come out or self-identify as anything but cis and hetero, because those things are seen as default settings” (p56). In a similar way, Taylor explores the cross over between autistic gender variance and non-normative sexuality, noting that “people tend to be baffled by this intersectionality” (p66) when confronted by gender variant and non-heterosexual autistic people. Taylor challenge those who “try to discredit individuals saying they have something “broken” in their brain (being autistic), which has resulted in their LGBTQ identity” (ibid), the sort of viewpoint expressed in other texts featured in this chapter. In these respects, the autistic voices featured in the text articulate their own grievances with dominant representations of the intersection of gender, sexuality, and autism in people’s lives. The contributors challenge the ways in which such intersections are represented in pathologising and infantilising terms. Instead, the voices platformed in the text portray the relationship between these aspects in more positive terms, affirming the validity of these autistic people’s identities as gendered and sexual subjects.

In their contribution, Alyia declares that they view being autistic and trans as “a fabulous combination” as it means that they are “far less inclined to put other people in neat little nifty boxes” (p117). In this respect, gender non-conformity offers autistic individuals a critical perspective which allows them to operate outside of restrictive social norms and categories. As Taylor argues, it is the terms of “a neurotypical, cisnormative and heteronormative world” (p67) which should be changed, not autistic gender variant and non-heterosexual people. In critiquing social conditions that oppress autistic people of different genders and sexualities, the participants’ perspectives echo those of the neurodiversity movement. In this way, although the text itself may be a written in the format of a self-help guide for autistic readers, it clearly articulates a set of critical political perspectives. Such perspectives offer framings which demonstrate that being autistic and gender variant is legitimate, and work to challenge disablist clinical and journalistic representations of autistic people as gendered subjects which infantilise and pathologise them. In doing so, the text can be seen to attempt to shift the perceptions of non-autistic readers away from viewing autistic people in these harmful terms, whilst at the same time providing autistic audiences with accounts which they can relate to and find affirmative in terms of the positive portrayal of autistic gender and sexual variance.

Concluding Remarks

It is clear that in the contemporary period there are divergent and conflicting framings of autistic gender variant people as gendered subjects. A moral panic around the greater visibility of such a population in the UK has promoted a particular set of framings which are hostile and suspicious in nature. Whether it be in the form of academic research or journalistic commentary, autistic gender variant people, particularly autistic youth, are treated critically or dismissively. Autism and gender variance are presented in causal terms, with autistic people's gender non-conformity understood as a result of their impairments. Trans and non-binary autistic people are represented as confused about their identities on account of their obsessive behaviours and intellectual deficits. In certain cases, they are portrayed as having been indoctrinated by trans activists into wrongly believing that they are gender variant. The possibility that someone could legitimately be autistic and gender variant at the same time is treated with suspicion in such accounts.

In many popular representations of autistic gender variance, such as those explored in this chapter, autistic people are further infantilised on account of their impairments. Possibilities for autistic people to live as gendered subjects outside of dominant terms are foreclosed in such portrayals. Gender variance in autistic people's lives is presented as merely another symptom of their biological disorder which should be discouraged for their own sake, particularly in the case of autistic young people. In turn, the fear of autistic youth being manipulated encourages moral outrage on behalf of the supposedly victimised children and teenagers. In order to protect vulnerable autistic young people, scholars, journalists, and professionals encourage the public to challenge transgender activists, who are depicted as folk devils. In this way, the panic contributes to a wider social backlash against gender variant people's struggles for social recognition and improved medical provision, as notably highlighted in a recent legal case regarding the Tavistock Clinic's provision of trans healthcare for young people (Gendered Intelligence, 2020). The actual voices and perspectives of autistic gender variant youth appear absent from these popular accounts, as other social actors claim to speak and act on their behalf.

As Mendes and Maroney’s text makes clear, however, autistic gender variant people are able to articulate their own experiences, and thereby speak back to dominant harmful framings. In place of such framings, the text provides more affirmative accounts of autistic gender variant people’s experiences. Autism and gender variance are understood as legitimate intersecting aspects of people’s lives. These accounts draw attention to the harmful terms of normalcy prevalent in societies shaped by disablism, compulsory heterosexuality, and gender normativity, terms which oppress autistic gender variant people. Far from being a problem which needs to be discouraged, gender variance amongst autistic people demonstrates a challenge to dominant social norms around disability, gender, and sexuality. Such norms harm autistic people, particularly those who are gender and sexually non-conforming.

In order to create a society which accepts neurodiversity, as suggested by the autistic contributors to Mendes and Maroney’s text, it is necessary to contest dominant gendered norms and expectations as much as disablism itself. Work considered in Chapter 7 develops these insights, demonstrating the possibilities for coalitional theoretical work and organising between different movements. Such insights, in turn, recognise the legitimacy of autistic gender variant people. For such people, autism is not simply a biomedical category, but forms an integral aspect of their identities which intersects with their gender.

Chapter 7: Speaking Back In Other Voices

Introductory Remarks

As discussed in Chapter 3, neurodiversity has emerged as an influential theoretical framework and broad social movement over recent decades. Developing in parallel to the proliferation of biomedical and psychological accounts of autism, which, as this thesis has shown so far, have been reproduced within the wider public sphere through such forms as self-help literature and popular fiction, neurodiversity has emphasised socially informed and politicised understandings of autistic experience. These understandings reject the pathologisation of autism as a disorder, focusing instead on the necessity of social change to improve conditions for autistic people. Self-advocacy organisations, such as the American Autistic-Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) and the British Autistic UK, campaign around various issues facing autistic people, such as inadequate service provision and incarceration, with their organisational work informed by the insights of neurodiversity (ASAN, 2020; Autistic UK, 2020).

Neurodiversity's theoretical and political emergence during this period is reflected in the production of self-advocacy literature. As highlighted in Chapter 4, growing numbers of texts regarding everyday experiences of autism have been produced in recent decades, with the self-help writing of autistic authors such as Hendrickx (2015) and Goodall (2016) granted a platform by mainstream publishers such as Jessica Kingsley Publishers. At the same time, there has been the emergence of politicised neurodiversity writing in the forms of collections by autistic writers, with small publishers and self-advocacy organisations often helping to produce such collections. The collection *Loud Hands: autistic people speaking* (Bascom, 2012) published by ASAN offers a notable example of such writing, compiling canonical work from within the neurodiversity movement, such as that of Sinclair (2012) discussed in Chapter 3, and original pieces from contemporary autistic scholars and activists. Similarly, the DragonBee Press collection *All the weight of our dreams: On living racialized autism* (Brown, Ashkenazy and Giwa-Onaiwu, 2017) features various contributions from Black autistic people and autistic people of colour discussing their experiences at the intersections of autism and race.

Several of such collections have focused on gender and sexuality in autistic people's lives. These collections, I argue, provide a platform for autistic people whose experiences are inadequately reflected in popular accounts focusing on autism, gender and sexuality. Autistic people who have experiences of gender and sexuality which fall outside of the terms of heteronormativity and gender normativity have been able to discuss their own personal accounts through such media texts. Such texts enable in-depth explorations of the ways in which autistic people live as gendered and sexual subjects. In this respect, such collections provide opportunities for autistic people to speak back to dominant representations of autistic gender and sexuality and, in turn, offer alternative representations. In my view, such texts work to challenge social and cultural barriers facing autistic people, such as the pathologisation of autistic gender variance and sexuality discussed in previous chapters.

As highlighted earlier in this thesis, texts such as the self-help literature analysed in Chapter 4 are predominantly addressed to non-autistic readers, such as the parents, carers, and partners of autistic people. In contrast, collections produced by autistic self-advocates are primarily intended to educate and engage autistic readers themselves. In place of non-autistic experts offering autistic people guidance on how to they should approach matters such as sexual relationships, self-advocacy literature treats autistic people as the experts of their own experiences. In doing so, the authors of such collections avoid treating autistic people as simply impaired and in need of neurotypical guidance. Autistic people may experience challenges, such as difficulties in navigating the social norms of sexual, romantic, and intimate relationships, but the authors of such literature avoid treating them as being inherently defined by their impairments. Self-advocacy literature instead frames autistic people as agents capable of understanding themselves and enacting change on personal and societal levels. The personal difficulties experienced by autistic people are situated within social contexts, with self-advocacy authors acknowledging that such contexts frequently prove disabling in nature.

In this chapter, I analyse two examples of Anglo-American autistic self-advocacy writing produced in the last decade focused on autistic sexuality and gender. I explore their approaches to the intersections of autism, sexuality and gender in people's lives, examining the ways in which contributors to these collections speak back to dominant accounts and advance their own perspectives. I focus upon the collection *relationships and sexuality* (Ashkenazy and Yergeau, 2013), produced as a resource by the USA-based Autism Now Centre, The Arc, and ASAN and the zine *in camouflage: a zine on the intersection of autism and gender* (Disabled Students Campaign, 2017) produced by British autistic university students and the Cambridge University Students Union Disabled Students' Campaign. Both of these texts, published online and made freely available by their respective producers, include a variety of autistic authors talking about their experiences of sexual relationships, gender non-conformity, and forms of disablist discrimination. As I explore these examples of self-advocacy literature, I critically consider the counter-framings of autistic sexuality and gender that these texts offer their readers in opposition to more mainstream accounts, such as Baron-Cohen's (2004) extreme male brain framing discussed previously. I argue that such texts offer neurodiversity informed approaches to these subjects which challenge the limitations of contemporary biomedical perspectives. The politicised engagements with issues of gender, sexuality, and disability present in these texts reject pathologisation and instead promote acceptance of autistic people, including autistic women, gender variant people, and LGBTQ people. Self-advocacy literature of this kind empowers autistic people to critically engage with social and cultural forces which disable them, such as inadequate service provision for autistic women and restrictions on autistic people's gender and sexual non-conformity.

Neurodiversity and Gender/Sexual Variance

As show in the analysis featured in Chapter 6, recent decades have seen increased attention regarding the apparent connections between autism and forms of sexual and gender variance. Within the Anglo-American context, many influential accounts analysing such connections have clearly responded to such phenomena in negative terms. Accounts which treat autistic people's sexualities as problematic in nature, as highlighted in Chapter 5, or blame autism for causing young people to believe that they are gender variant, as explored in Chapter 6, offer notable examples of such negative framings.

It is important to recognise, however, that the same period which has witnessed the production of such framings has also seen the emergence of more critical literature regarding these topics. Scholars working within the fields of neurodiversity, queer theory, trans theory, and gender studies have produced work challenging influential accounts of autistic gender and sexuality, with such scholars being either autistic themselves or influenced by the neurodiversity movement (Yergeau, 2018). Feminist scholarship by Bumiller (2008) and Jack (2014), for example, has responded favourably to the growing visibility of gender nonconformity and sexual diversity amongst autistic communities. These scholars understand and present such developments in non-pathologising terms. They openly reject understandings of autistic sexual and gender diversity as symptomatic of autistic impairments, as found in the hypothesis that gender variance in autistic youth emergences from intellectual deficits and obsessive behaviours. Such work, instead, emphasises the ways in which autistic people's struggles against social norms include the rejection of the restrictive confines of sexual and gender norms. These authors, in turn, argue that neurodiversity intersects with feminist and sexual politics focused on challenging gendered and heterosexist power.

In her exploration of the relationship of neurodiversity to feminism, Bumiller notes that "some people with autism from an early age disidentify with their gender" (2008, p977). She acknowledges the ways in which researchers have investigated "whether cross-gender identification is the result of autistic tendencies, such as the preoccupations with peculiar interests or the failure to understand social cues" (p978). At the same time, Bumiller highlights how the neurodiversity movement "has raised vigorous objections to the scientific community's pathological view of nonnormative gender behaviour" (ibid), with such a view treating autistic people's failures to conform to expected gendered norms and practices as problematic in nature. Bumiller shares such a critique, arguing that when professionals view the behavioural preferences of autistic children in regards to gender presentation and identification "as merely gender inappropriate behaviour they are disregarding the child's own conception of gender relevance and/or attachments to objects that reduce anxiety" (p977). For her, opposition to professional "medical protocols" (ibid), and a shared desire for social transformation and acceptance of difference, makes alliances between neurodiversity, trans and intersex activists possible. In this respect, Bumiller's work supports the argument made by scholars such as Kafer (2013) and Slater (2015) that rejection of accepted norms functions as a shared basis for coalitional politics between disability, feminist, and LGBTQ movements.

In a similar way to Bumiller, Jack views the relationship between autism and gender variance in an affirmative manner. Examining online writing by autistic people, she highlights the ways in which such writings challenge heteronormative and gender normative terms. For Jack, "understanding how autistic people think about gender can offer potentially transformative insights into how gender works," suggesting that "these insights are often dulled by practices of gender remediation that seek to shoehorn people into a small set of normalised gender categories" (2014, p185). She critiques understandings of autistic people's experiences which, in her view, reproduce normative account of gender. Such understandings include Baron-Cohen's extreme male brain theory and studies which "seek to explain away gender dysphoria as a symptom of autism" (p204), accounts which depict "gender ambiguity...as a problem or disorder" (p205). Drawing upon autistic people's own accounts, Jack notes how some autistic people resist such normalising understandings prevalent in psychological research and clinical practice. She highlights, for example, accounts of autistic women whose experiences appear to contradict Baron-Cohen's extreme male brain framing.

In these accounts, autistic women's "perseverations, or intense interests" do not correspond with the masculine form of "systemic thinking" (p188) which Baron Cohen associates with autism. These women suggest that their obsessive interests can "be seen as example of empathizing activities" (ibid), for example, being interested in novels and cats. At the same time, Jack notes a wide variety of gender and sexual identities present amongst online autistic communities. Some members adopt terms from LGBTQ communities to describe themselves, whilst others create their own terms, providing "autistic individuals with nontraditional gender identities" with "an alternative framework" (p197) for describing their own identities. In these different ways, autistic people form communities with their own ways of representing and understanding themselves as gendered and sexual subjects.

Counterpublics, Counter-Literature?

The production and circulation of self-advocacy literature by autistic authors and neurodiversity groups is connected to the emergence of autistic communities online. As detailed in accounts by Jack, Silberman (2015), and McGrath (2017), the formation of autistic communities over recent decades has been facilitated by the expansion of the Internet since the early 1990s. As Hacking (2010) puts it, the Internet has allowed autistic people to "communicate with others in a new way, sometimes establishing profound personal relationships that were otherwise inaccessible" (p650). In this way, forums, blogs, and social media have offered autistic people opportunities to connect, share experiences and politically organise. Indeed, as highlighted in Chapter 3, neurodiversity initially emerged as a term in autistic online spaces before being featured in academic publications (Singer, 1997; Graby, 2015).

Drawing on work by Fraser (1990) and Warner (2002), I argue that such autistic online communities function as "counterpublics" (Fraser, 1990, p67). According to these authors, counterpublics exist as "parallel discursive arenas" where "subordinate social groups" excluded from the public sphere are able to create and "circulate counterdiscourses" (ibid). In my view, autistic online spaces constitute such counterpublics, as they provide platforms for autistic people to speak back to dominant framings of their lives and, in turn, promote their own counter-normative perspectives. As Jack highlights, such spaces provide autistic people with opportunities to discuss matters of sexual non-conformity and gender variance, with autistic people developing their own vocabularies to describe their sexual and gendered experiences, ones which exist outside of dominant gendered and heteronormative terms.

The publications considered in this chapter offer examples of the ways in which autistic counterpublics collaborate to produce and distribute counterdiscourses regarding the intersections between autism, gender and sexuality in people's lives. In the same way that zines, small independent publications, have historically been able to "form networks and forge communities around diverse identities and interests" (Duncombe, 2008, p7), these texts contribute to the growth of autistic communities and self-advocacy efforts. Both collections platform a range of autistic perspectives regarding autistic people's experiences of disability, gender, and sexuality. By publishing these collections as open access documents online, the authors make such resources freely and easily available for readers. In these ways representations of autistic gender and sexuality which challenge those present in mainstream texts, such as those considered in the earlier chapters of this thesis, are able to be widely circulated. As a result, I argue that these collections are able to inform both autistic and non-autistic people of such alternative framings. In doing so, such collections support autistic people's self-advocacy around matters of gender and sexuality, as they are able to find and refer to such resources in their own struggles.

Handbook Challenges

The collection *relationships and sexuality* (Ashkenazy and Yergeau, 2013), produced as a resource by the USA-based Autism Now Centre, The Arc, and ASAN is described on its front cover as "a handbook for and by autistic people" (p1). The text seeks to present information surrounding the topics of sexuality and relationships in a way that helps "to empower individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities" (piv). In the collection's foreword, autistic author Ashkenazy states that the collection provides "advice, rich perspectives, and stories…woven through the personal experiences" (pv) of autistic contributors. This, she argues, is in-keeping with ASAN's emphasis on self-advocacy, which is focused on enabling autistic people to "live fulfilling and productive lives" (ibid). The text approaches a broad range of topics related to sexuality and relationships, including discussions of sexual consent, asexuality, and abuse. These topics are presented under the sections "Identity and becoming," "Expectations, communication, and commitment," "Signals: Bodies and being," "Gender and sexuality," "Debunking myths and stereotypes," and "Abuse" (pvii). The inclusion of such material, Ashkenazy argues, enables the anthology "to take readers on a thought-provoking journey about relationships and sexuality through the eyes of Autistic self advocates" (pv). (sic)

As the acknowledgements section notes, the authors "realised all too quickly" during the production of the collection "how little has been said about autism and sexuality" (piii). In this way, the text's producers can be seen to support the argument advanced by Groner (2012), discussed in Chapter 5, that autistic sexuality is frequently marginalised or erased in dominant discourses. The handbook, in this respect, can be understood as a direct intervention into debates and controversies regarding autistic sexuality. The collection rejects the erasure and pathologisation of autistic sexuality, providing a space for autistic people to talk in-depth about their own experiences and challenge established representations. In turn, the handbook's provision of advice and analysis regarding sexuality and relationships, based upon autistic people's own experiences, avoids the issue of non-autistic expert voices being centred over those of autistic people themselves, an issue present in some of the self-help literature considered in Chapter 5. Literature produced by self-advocates enables discussion of these topics in relation to direct personal experience, treating autistic people as their own experts. Autistic people are shown as being capable of addressing sexual matters, with the authors avoiding the risks of infantilisation and enforced normalisation present in the work of non-autistic experts engaging with such matters. On the surface, such personal accounts may not appear explicitly political, especially in comparison to neurodiversity writing from Sinclair (2012) or Walker (2013, 2014, 2015) considered earlier in this thesis. I argue, however, that through their explorations of the everyday lived entanglements of autism, gender, and sexuality these texts effectively function as forms of social analysis and critique. Such accounts offer counterdiscourses to framings of autistic experience which inform institutional practices towards and personal interactions with autistic people. They offer alternative representations of disability, gender, and sexuality as aspects of autistic people's lived experiences as subjects.

An account featured in the collection from an autistic woman called Andee Joyce, in which she discusses her history of sexual relationships, is particularly worth exploring in order to engage with the text's critical framings of autistic sexuality. On an initial reading, Joyce's account appears to reproduce dominant biomedical discourses regarding autism. Autism is portrayed as a biological condition which causes difficulties for the person affected. In her account, Joyce discussed experiencing difficulties in sexual and romantic relationships whilst she was undiagnosed for much of her early life. Describing the failures of her first marriage and her various difficulties in heterosexual relationships with non-autistic men, Joyce states:

> What I didn't know, in all those years I went undiagnosed, was this: it was what was going on beneath my scalp that was the real barrier between the men I pursued and me. Men (nonautistic men, that is; I knew of no other kind) were just plain weirded out by me: my raggedy speech patterns, my staring spells, my almost costumelike wardrobe, my idiosyncratic interests and unladylike sense of humour, even the herky-jerky left-sided way I moved and walked.
>
> (p3)

Read in isolation, the passage appears to offer a medicalised model of autism where autism is understood primarily as a collection of deficits which restrict a person's life. Autistic impairments in the areas of communication and interaction seem to have prevented Joyce from participating in conventional intimate relationships. Autism, as Joyce describes, has resulted in behaviours which discourage men from being attracted to her. The underlying message of the passage could therefore be interpreted as being disablist in nature. Autism appears to be depicted as intrinsically damaging to an individual's life, in this case the capacity to engage in intimate relationships. In this way, Joyce's text could be interpreted as an expression of internalised ableism, as described by Campbell (2009).

As a whole, however, Joyce's account offers a critique of such a pathologising viewpoint. Joyce's account contains elements of biomedical framings of autism, but simultaneously her account highlights the ways in which personal experiences of autism, including those related to sexuality and gender, are affected by social contexts. Joyce's relationship difficulties were, as she says, the consequence of how non-autistic men responded to her behaviours as an autistic person. In this way, her relationship difficulties can be understood as the consequences of a struggle to participate in social relationships determined by non-autistic people, rather than being singularly caused by her own biological defects. Joyce's account in this respect illustrates the double empathy nature of autism analysed by Milton (2012a, 2012b). Autistic people's struggles to relate to non-autistic people are not simply the consequence of inherent deficits, but rather are caused by social conditions in which non-autistic people determine what is considered socially acceptable. Joyce's autistic behaviours, ones which disturbed her partners, are not the inherent problem. The problem is that such behaviours are viewed as unacceptable by non-autistic men under the dominant terms of normalcy. Joyce's speech and bodily movements, as she suggests in the passage quoted earlier, fell outside of such social conventions. As her passage illustrates, autistic women who fail to adhere to such norms, ones shaped by forces of disablism, heteronormativity, and gender normativity, experience forms of discrimination. In this way, Joyce's discussion of her difficulties when engaging in heterosexual relationships with non-autistic men provides readers with an account of the everyday realities of such disablist and gendered marginalisation.

Joyce's account in this collection further explores these matters through a discussion of her difficulties in emulating normalcy during her first marriage to a neurotypical man:

> I married Brave Sir Mismatch because I wanted to feel “normal”…being married to someone who didn’t-wait couldn’t work with me as a team (the way I saw other happy couples doing) just made it that much worse.
>
> (2013, p3)

Joyce discusses her attempts to achieve the terms of normalcy through behavioural modification and changing her sense of self. In the end, despite such efforts, she states that:

> there was no way, no way at all that these nice, “normal” men I was drawn to for their seeming niceness and “normalcy” would ever even have considered giving me anything more than a fast roll in the hay, if that.
>
> (ibid)

Joyce’s efforts to adhere to the terms of normalcy, personally transforming herself through heteronormative coupling, prove futile in the end. Her account of such failure illustrates the ways in which norms around ability, gender, and sexuality are ones which do not suit autistic people. These norms prove disabling for autistic people. Autistic people may wish to achieve a state of neurotypical normalcy through emulating dominant terms, but doing so proves unachievable for many of them.

In the end, Joyce’s account, which concludes on the optimistic note of finding someone who does accept her as an autistic woman, highlights how social environments structured by norms of ability, gender, and sexuality prove harmful to autistic people. Instead of advocating that autistic people modify themselves to appear more ‘normal,’ Joyce’s account points to the problems of the social environments in which autistic people find themselves in. In this way, her account functions as a form of social critique. Such an account avoids reproducing framings of autism as the inherent cause of interpersonal difficulties, as found in the text written by Aston (2014) analysed in Chapter 4, and instead highlights the importance of social context in shaping autistic people’s lives. In this respect, whilst Joyce’s contribution may be a personal one, it has a wider social significance in terms of contesting dominant terms around autism, sexuality, and gender. Her contribution to the text promotes the social acceptance of autistic people as they are.

An account offered by Caroline Narby in the collection considers the ways in which the politics of sexuality, gender, and disability intersect on the levels of personal identity and societal discrimination. Narby describes herself as a feminist and lesbian woman who “quickly incorporated Asperger’s into (her) self-identity” (2013, p9) when she was diagnosed. Narby rejects essentialist understandings of “social categories like “woman,” “gay,” and “autistic”” as being “fixed, objective realities,” instead understanding them as “constructs” (ibid) which nevertheless inform her sense of self. In this respect, Narby’s perspective reflects the sort of critical theoretical stances echoed in this thesis, with autism understood not as a purely biological condition of deficits, but instead as an aspect of a person’s self which is socially situated and intersects with gender and sexuality. Such a position opens up space for the sorts of counter-normative alliances advocated for by Slater and Bumiller, with Narby’s politicised understanding of her autistic identity connected to her feminist and lesbian advocacy.

Narby’s subsequent description of the reception of her autism by others, such as the audience of a panel she took part in post-diagnosis, further demonstrates how biomedical and psychological representations of autistic experience negatively affect perceptions of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects. As Narby puts it:

> During the panel, I experienced something new and unsettling. As I sat in front of a small audience of fellow students, siblings, and parents, I realised that, to all those people, having Asperger’s was my only identifying feature. No matter what I might say, now that they knew I was autistic, that would be all they saw. My identity was forcibly flattened into a single trait; every other quality or experience was automatically “tainted.”

(p9)

In this passage, there exists a tension between the recognition of autism's existence as an aspect of personal identity, and the acceptance of an individual as autistic. As detailed earlier in Chapter 3, neurodiversity advocates such as Sinclair have historically argued that autism should be understood as a key aspect of personal identity, in response to rehabilitative desires for autistic individuals to be cured of their disorder. As Narby highlights, however, recognition of autism as a central aspect of personal identity under current dominant biomedical and psychological terms means that autism is understood as a monocausal factor which determines all other aspects of a person's life. Such a framing of autistic experience results in the denigration of autistic people's sexualities and genders, as Narby makes explicit in the following passage:

> If I happened to mention that I was gay, it might be because I have a "male brain," or because I lack the social aptitude to express "appropriate" sexuality. If I never mentioned my sexual orientation, it might be assumed that I don't have one, because autistic people are overwhelmingly perceived as non-sexual.
>
> (ibid)

Narby describes being unable to discuss the relationship between her autism, gender, and sexuality at the aforementioned panel, saying that she would have otherwise attempted to draw attention to the fact "that autistic women tend to be overlooked because, culturally, autism as a condition tends to be gendered male" (ibid). Later on in her account, Narby draws an analogy between her reception as an autistic person on the panel and her reception as a lesbian in other situations, with her identity as "a complex and contradictory individual" (p10) reduced to a label.

Narby's account shows how popular understandings of the relationship between autism, gender, and sexuality in autistic people's lives, ones informed by biomedical, psychological, and cultural framings, inadequately engage with the experiences of those who live outside of heteronormative terms. As Narby demonstrates, autism is understood as the biological cause of sexual non-conformity, with her lesbianism at risk of being dismissed as a consequence of her autism. In critiquing such a framing, and drawing analogies between the treatment of those who are neurodivergent and those who are LGBTQ, Narby is able to speak back to dominant framings. In doing so, she offer readers, including autistic readers, a more nuanced account of autism's relationship to gender and sexuality in autistic people's lives.

Part 4 of the collection features several accounts by authors who explicitly focus on issues of structural oppression in regards to autism, gender, and sexuality. An account by Leah Jane Grantham, for example, highlights the parallels between autism and gender variance in terms of people's relationships to harmful norms and institutions. Grantham argues that:

> Helping a romantic partner go through a gender transition is a lot like being autistic, in a way: the most difficult part of it really doesn't involve the actual transition or the gender identity, but rather, the barriers set up by society, the medical establishment, and people's individual attitudes that spring from prejudice, misinformation, and good intentions that happen to be combined with bad actions.
>
> (p63)

In a similar way to Narby's description of her identities as an autistic woman and lesbian being used to flatten her sense of self, Grantham highlights how there are parallels between the experiences of autistic and trans people as social groups. These groups, including those who inhabit both categories, face significant social barriers. Autism and gender variance are not the source of people's problems, with the problems facing these groups in reality the result of social contexts. The potential for shared political alliances, acknowledged by Bumiller and Slater, is present in such an account, with Grantham's contribution highlighting to readers how similar critiques can be made of the ways in which institutions negatively affect autistic and trans people.

In another contribution to Part 4, Adrienne Smith discusses the relationship between autism and asexuality in a way that emphasises the disabling effects of therapy for some autistic people. Drawing attention to the widespread pathologisation of autistic sexuality, including asexuality, Smith states that past therapists have responded negatively to their autism and asexuality. According to these therapists, Smith's autism caused them to be "self-centred and unempathic" (p92), and therefore unwilling to engage in sexual intercourse with their partner. In this way, Smith's "true autistic nature" (ibid) caused their asexuality. In addition, Smith notes a message from their therapists that all autistic people are naturally asexual, supporting Groner's argument noted earlier in this thesis regarding the historical association of autism and asexuality in pathologising clinical and popular accounts. Smith's asexuality was, in this way, understood as "a mental disorder" and the product of their "autism-induced gender confusion" (ibid).

As in Narby's account, Smith faced judgement on account of their autism, with autism functioning as a "tool and explanation" (p93) for non-autistic people to develop apparent insights into their identity and behaviour, including their sexuality. Smith criticises "the prying, fascinated, contact-loving eyes of normalcy" (ibid) which understood their autism and asexuality in biomedical terms as disorders. Smith's account illustrates the role of the curative imaginary critiqued by Kafer in relation to autistic sexuality, with Smith noting how "disability service professionals" believed that treating their autism would cure their asexuality and "pan-gender romantic attractions" (p94). With autism framed as a problem, treatments are consequently viewed as being able to cure associated sexual disorders. In this way, autism and gender and sexual non-conformity in people's lives are once again understood under dominant framings as a set of problems which biomedical interventions must address. Medical treatments thereby reinforce the disablement of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects.

At the same time, Smith's account demonstrates the potential for autistic people, despite the dismissals of medical experts, to form "romantic attachments, or gasp of gasps, queer romantic attachments" (ibid). In this respect, the account challenges pathologising representations, showing how autistic people can live happily as asexual people. Societal disablism, rather than autism, proves to be the major problem in their lives.

Another piece featured the collection from Michael Higginbotham similarly challenges medicalised accounts of autism which understand relationship difficulties as primarily the result of autistic people's impairments. Higginbotham, in turn, challenges the harmful framing of autistic people as being incapable of emotional and sexual relationships. Discussing his own marriage, Higginbotham states:

> I hear that people on the spectrum don't know how to have or maintain relationships with others. We are told regularly that we lack empathy, theory of mind, and the ability or desire to maintain social relationships. For me this just doesn't hold true, and it certainly has not been my experience.
>
> (p99)

Higginbotham argues that autistic people are capable of forming intimate relationships, challenging psychological framings which dismiss this. Echoing the critique of the theory of mind approach advanced by neurodiversity scholars such as Yergeau (2013) and Milton (2012a, 2012b), Higginbontham states:

> Quite horrifically, many researchers assert that Autistic people lack a theory of mind (ToM)—that is, the ability to "mind read" and recognise that other people have their own unique mental states, emotions and experiences. ToM, to be frank, is an ableist and oppressive theory. It suggests that Autistic people lack humanity, empathy, and worth. Furthermore, non-autistic people often use ToM as a way to silence Autistic people.
>
> (ibid)

In this passage, Higginbontham advances an explicit attack on the influential psychological framing of mindblindness developed by researchers such as Baron-Cohen (1999) and Frith (2003). He suggests that far from offering a biological explanation for autistic impairments, such a framing works to dismiss the lived experiences of autistic people. In this way, Higginbontham uses the platform of the ASAN collection to challenge dominant representations, offering readers a more critical account of the lived realities of autism. Such a reading, which is not as readily available in therapeutic literature or popular cultural work of the sort explored in the earlier chapters of this thesis, helps to develop alternative understandings of autistic people's lives in keeping with the neurodiversity approach. Rather than seeing autistic people as unable to develop meaningful emotional and romantic relationships with others on account of their deficits, Higginbontham's account suggests that autistic people's difficulties are in many respects shared by non-autistic people "who have difficulties with the construction and maintenance of any type of relationship" (p102). Autistic people share common experiences with other members of society, such as difficulties in sexual and romantic relationships, but have their experiences framed in pathologising terms which contribute to their disablement. This critique of the disablement of autistic people is echoed by autistic writers in the other self-advocacy collection analysed in the next section of this chapter.

People First

in camouflage: a zine on the intersection of autism and gender was published in 2017 by Cambridge University's Disabled Student Campaign (DSC). As the campaign group state on their website, members "organised an event entitled "Autistic People, Not Gendered Minds" in opposition to a talk given by Simon Baron-Cohen in Cambridge" (para1). Such an event was intended to challenge "Baron-Cohen's extreme male brain theory of autism and his refusal to consult autistic people on their own experiences of their neurotype and gender by creating a space for honest and safe discussion of how these issues are interlinked" (para2). Out of this event came the impetus for a zine aimed at exploring such matters in alternative ways, with the DSC intending for the zine to provide a platform for tackling such issues as "How are autistic traits gendered?” (para3), underdiagnoses of autism amongst particular populations, and autistic people’s own experiences of gender. Autistic students from Cambridge, Oxford, and Anglia Ruskin universities contributed materials to the zine, with the zine’s title *in camouflage* chosen as “a reference to the phenomenon of “autism camouflaging” (ibid) in which people actively conceal their autism.

As a text, the zine is overall defined by the critical stances of many of its contributors towards Baron-Cohen’s essentialist framing of autism as a masculine condition, with several pieces openly critiquing his work. The text offers an exploration of various responses to the interconnected issues of autism, sexuality, and gender through a mixture of personal accounts, poetry, illustrations, and photographs submitted to the zine, with the collection blending various textual forms and genres together. The contributors challenge dominant framings of autism as a gendered condition, drawing on their own personal experiences to present accounts of how autism, gender, and sexuality interact in people’s lives multifaceted and counter-normative ways. Such an exploration provides a direct challenge to the assumption that autistic deficits, as encapsulated in the theory of mindblindness explored in previous chapters, prevent autistic people from understanding their own experiences. Contributors to the zine creatively demonstrate that autistic people are in reality able to develop accounts of how autism, gender, and sexuality, along with the social norms and barriers entangled with these categories, shape their personal experiences.

Furthermore, the zine demonstrates how autistic people can engage with such experiences on their own terms. Some contributors are shown to reject the dominant framings of autism as a masculine condition, while others appropriate elements of such representations to legitimise their own experiences of gender non-conformity. Indeed, the decision taken by several contributors to detail their experiences as autistic women and gender variant people in the form of poetry or art work itself can be seen to trouble the historical association of autism with scientific geek masculinity. Such contributions demonstrate the diverse interests and talents of autistic people who do not conform to such a gendered representation.

One notable contribution which directly engages with dominant framings of autism in terms of extreme masculinity comes from an author referred to as G, who offers a poem exploring their personal experiences of gender and autism. In a preface to their contribution, G states that the poem is intended:

> as a response to Mr Baron-Cohen's assertion that girls are more rarely diagnosed as autistic due to a biological lack of "man-ness," to illustrate that some of the more stereotypical autistic (/masculine) (sic) traits are often systematically socialised out of us, and resisting this is very tricky. Boys are emotional and girls are rational, and that in no way undermines their gender.
>
> (p5)

Such a response to Baron-Cohen's work on the part of G directly contests the troubling naturalisation and essentialism inherent in his and others' work on autism as a masculine condition. G's response draws attention to the social factors at play in the experiences of autistic girls and women, offering a more multifaceted picture regarding gendered experiences amongst autistic people. By ignoring the social aspects of autistic people's experiences, namely the ways in which social contexts shape their lives, Baron-Cohen's framing offers a narrow account of the role of gender in autistic people's lives. Such an accounts fails to acknowledge how disablism and gender norms can negatively impact autistic girls and women.

G's poem itself focuses upon her younger experiences of academic achievement and interest in scientific subjects, experiences which resulted in several educational and familial disputes. In the process, G touches on the various ways in which neurotypical desires for autistic youth to adhere to gender norms result in psycho-emotional disablement of the sort highlighted by Thomas (1999) and Milton and Moon (2012). In one passage, for example, G describes attempting to police her autistic and gender non-conforming behaviour:

> That was the year she wanted to be Normal
>
> And she made lists of what Not To Do At school
>
> She gossiped with the other girls at lunchtime
>
> And giggled when the boys walked past
>
> She didn't wet herself any more
>
> Just had panic attacks in the stalls
>
> And her mother said she looked much prettier with long hair
>
> Which got in her way.
>
> (2017, p6)

In this passage, G gives the reader a vivid depiction of the ways in which social norms around gender, sexuality, and disability intersect in the lives of young autistic women. The younger G's decision to be 'normal' involves repressing particular behaviours, as she engages with others in line with current forms of acceptability. For autistic women to be considered normal, she suggests, they have to downplay the autistic aspects of their personal identities. Additionally, autistic women have to perform gender and sexuality under the terms of compulsory heterosexuality. In illustrating this argument through her poetry, G depicts the close relationship between heterosexuality and disablism, as highlighted by McRuer (2006) and Slater in the earlier chapters of this thesis. G seems to suggest that a young autistic girl can gain a degree of recognition and acceptance from those close to her by complying with dominant norms, with G’s mother shown to appreciate G’s embrace of normative femininity.

As G makes clear in her poem, efforts by autistic women to comply with dominant norms prove personally damaging, with the reference to “panic attacks in the stall” (ibid) suggesting that efforts to mask autism produce anxiety and distress for autistic women. As noted in Chapter 2, autistic masking has been shown to result in severe psychological distress for autistic people (Hull et al., 2017; Cook, Ogden and Winstone, 2018). G’s poem offers an account of such psycho-emotional distress as it is experienced by autistic girls and young women. G’s reference to her long hair getting in her way, in turn, seems to symbolise the ways in which conventional standards of femininity can prove particularly restrictive for autistic girls. The implication is that such long hair caused her sensory distress, but that she nevertheless felt compelled to maintain such a feminine appearance in order to satisfy her neurotypical family and peers. Debates over the extent to which autistic youth should purposely act to fit into social environments such as schools, as seen in Nichols et al.’s (2009) advice encouraging autistic girls to appear presentable, are reflected in the poem. G explicitly attempts self-normalisation through the performance of gender and sexuality in socially acceptable ways, with the practices of standard heterosexual teen girlhood, such as gossiping, intended to disguise her autism and allow her to fit in with her non-autistic peers. Doing so, however, is clearly shown to come at a considerable psycho-emotional cost.

G’s poem continues with further exploration of G’s attempts to adhere to normative femininity and integrate herself into her neurotypical social environments:

> Once in a fashion magazine, she wrote an equation
>
> And didn’t finish balancing it
>
> Because maths was for boys, and she thought that that was right

And that’s what she was all about.

Her teachers said she should be a teacher too, or a Social Worker

And her daddy said he was happy

Because she was his sweet caring girl

And she believed it.

(2017, p6)

As can be seen, G openly disavows an interest in mathematics, a subject which is traditionally coded as masculine. In this passage, G challenges the association between masculinity, autism, and science promoted by the extreme male brain framing of autism. She shows the ways in which such an association limits the interests and opportunities of autistic girls and young women. G might have been interested in mathematics, in such a way that if she were a boy she might be recognised as autistic, but she had to distance herself from such an interest and become a “sweet caring girl” (ibid) in order to adhere to normative femininity. In this way, G’s poem contests the dominant gendering of autism as a biological condition observable in masculine geeks (Jack, 2014). The poem suggests that such a framing fails to recognise the experiences of autistic girls and women who might share ‘geeky’ interests with autistic boys and men, but who fall outside of the diagnostic picture as they are expected to perform appropriate femininity. As G puts it in the preface to the poem, traits and interests that are coded as masculine are discouraged in autistic girls. In her view, framings of those such as Baron-Cohen which depict autistic people as essentially masculine play a harmful role in shaping medical and cultural recognition of autistic people.

G’s poem continues with an exploration of the psycho-emotional costs of living as an autistic young woman attempting to repress her autistic identity and adhere to heterosexual and gendered norms:

That was the year she wanted to be a Social Worker

And she wished she was pretty

On the way to school.

She was sad at lunchtime

But didn’t know what this feeling was

She bunked off school a lot now

And hid at local parks to be alone

And her mother said

Why was she so quiet these days?

(pp6-7)

In these lines, G further demonstrates the ways in which efforts to conform to gender norms and compulsory able-bodiedness /able-mindedness prove harmful to autistic girls and young women. G’s attempts to adhere to these terms are shown to have proven disabling for her. In seeking to become more normal for her family and peers, G suffered distress as a result of internalised ableism and psycho-emotional disablement, implying to the reader that she developed depression as a result of such efforts. Such harm, in turn, resulted in G isolating herself from her family and peers, with her efforts to integrate into a social environment determined by non-autistic people paradoxically leading her to withdraw from it. In this way, the poem draws attention to the disabling forces which impact young autistic women on an everyday level.

G’s poem concludes on an optimistic note, as she came to accept herself as an autistic person, engaging with mathematics and ceasing to “pretend” (p7) not to be autistic at school. G’s decisions were in the end accepted by her friends and parents, with her father “pleased that she was his little mathematician again” and her mother saying she was “so proud of her little girl” (ibid) when G was accepted into university. In this way, G’s poem demonstrates that if autistic people are allowed to pursue their own interests and not have to actively police their behaviour to mask their identities then they are likely to be happier. In turn, the poem suggests that neurotypical people, whether they be parents, peers, or educators, should socially accept autistic people. In this respect, the poem promotes a message of neurodiversity, with autism recognised as a legitimate aspect of personal identity, and societal forces, including gendered norms, depicted as harmful to autistic people’s psycho-emotional well-being. The poem provides an opportunity to speak back to the representation of autism as a masculine condition, with G showing the material consequences that such a framing can have for autistic girls and women. Framings of autism as a masculine condition fail to recognise the ways in which autistic traits and behaviours are policed in young women’s lives, including by themselves, as they struggle to meet the disabling terms of normalcy. In the end, G’s case proves fortunate as her family and peers come to accept her as an autistic young woman with interests traditionally coded as masculine. Such acceptance is not available to all autistic young women, with the poem critiquing the oppression that these girls and women continue to face.

Other contributions to the zine similarly offer explicit engagements with the work of those such as Baron-Cohen through written critiques. A contributor named Vrigo supports G’s critical account, drawing attention to the ways in which social contexts affect how autism manifests in amongst autistic boys and girls. Vrigo argues that:

> We all start with similar neurology, but completely different environments. We adapt and change to our environment, or we adapt our environment to us. Males on the spectrum tend to have the privilege to do the latter. While autistic girls are socialised in such a way that we are forced to adapt to our surroundings or be ostracised.
>
> (p20)

As in G’s account, autistic girls and young women are portrayed by Vrigo as inadequately recognised in dominant accounts. Baron-Cohen and his adherents depict autism as a biological condition, a brain type which they associate with masculine systemising. In doing so, they fail to recognise the significance of social contexts, in this case gender norms, in shaping how autistic people of different genders present themselves. In this respect, Vrigo highlights the socially situated nature of autism, echoing the analysis of neurodivergent scholars such as Milton. The ways in which autistic people of different genders exhibit autistic behaviours are shaped by social conditions, as opposed to being primarily caused by biological factors. In this way, Vrigo’s contribution suggests, different social conditions would result in autistic women being more publicly visible as they would no longer have their behaviours repressed.

An anonymous contributor tackles the troubling implications of Baron-Cohen’s framing of autism as the consequence of the extreme male brain for autistic trans people, particularly in terms of how such a framing informs medical gatekeeping. The contributor suggests that “for transgender autistic people…whichever sort of transgender they identify as, you get invalidated by his theories” (p12). They offer the following extensive passage which highlights the consequences of such invalidation for different autistic trans people:

> So essentially, if you are for example transfeminine, and you’ve been assigned male at birth but identify as more feminine, or as a trans woman, or as anything feminine, then often people including doctors will say “No, no, you can’t be a girl because you’re autistic, so that means you’re a boy.” And that means you can’t get access to health

> care and other things that you need, as well as obviously just social things like using she pronouns for example, because people are like “No you’re a boy, you’re autistic.”
>
> And equally if someone is transmasculine, then they’re told by family and doctors et cetera “Oh, of course you’re masculine, because you have a male brain, because you’re autistic”
>
> So that’s really how the two interact quite closely, they’re either used to sort of explain your transness or deny of your transness.
>
> (ibid)

This anonymous contributor draws attention to the sorts of issues facing gender variant autistic people previously discussed in Chapter 6. Influential understandings of autistic experience, such as those of Baron-Cohen, present autistic impairments as causing gendered confusion in individuals, rather than treating these as legitimate intersecting aspects of people’s personal identities. As this contributor highlights, conceiving of autism as an extreme male brain means that autistic trans masculine and trans feminine people often have their personal identities invalidated and needs dismissed, as they are prevented from receiving medical provision and social acceptance. In contrast to experts and commentators explored in Chapter 6 who argue that medical provision is too easily available to trans people, who in are reality misguided autistic people, the anonymous contributor highlights the ways in which influential thinking about autism as a masculine condition results in harmful medical gatekeeping. An autistic trans woman, as the contributor suggests, might be denied forms of medical assistance on the grounds that her dysphoria is in fact a consequence of being autistic, with autism’s masculine nature meaning that they really are the gender they were assigned at birth. In this way, the gendering of autism as inherently in influential framings is once again shown to have tangible negative effects for autistic people as gendered subjects.

An account by a contributor named Aisha also highlights the negative role gendered assumptions around autism play in shaping diagnosis and social attitudes towards autistic people. Aisha talks about growing up as “a tomboy,” with her interests and activities as a child placing her “into a category of masculinity” (p8). As she puts it, “my autism afforded me a gift of unconscious non-conformity that would let me revel in my interests without too much concern for what it meant to the outside world” (ibid). Over time, Aisha found herself “catapulted into more prescriptive gender roles” (ibid) in terms of dress and future prospects. She describes attempting to engage with “hair removal, makeup, and modest but fashionable femininity” whilst failing to “get it” (ibid). Such engagements with gender norms were further compounded by growing up within a Pakistani family whilst attending “a traditionally British all-girls school” (ibid). In this environment her interests, coded as masculine, made social engagement with other young women difficult, whilst she simultaneously struggled to exist in masculine spaces. As Aisha puts it, she “was inadvertently playing a social game with no ability to process the game plan” (ibid). When finally seeking a diagnosis for autism, Aisha describes how she experienced disbelief on the part of a psychiatrist who paradoxically viewed her appearance as being too feminine in nature.

Aisha’s account in the zine further demonstrates the everyday lived entanglements of autism and gender, which in her case were connected to issues of race and nationality. Initially, Aisha was able to engage in forms of more masculine gendered expression, but over time social expectations around gender and sexuality in regards to appropriate femininity proved restrictive. Her account, like others featured in the zine, highlights the ways in which social environments and institutions play a disabling role in autistic people’s lives. Her school environment, not only shaped by norms of gender and ability but by race and nationality, are shown to have created difficulties for her. In addition, therapeutic services are shown to have dismissed her autistic identity. In this respect, the zine offers an opportunity for Aisha to put forward a politicised and socially informed account of life as a South Asian autistic young woman. The masculine framing of autism, one which informs professionals services, is shown to have prevented her from receiving social recognition as an autistic person.

In contrast to the other contributions in the zine, Heather offers an account which is more sympathetic to Baron-Cohen’s framing of autism as extreme masculinity. For Heather, the defining of autism in terms of the extreme male brain matches with her personal experience in certain respects. As she puts it, “As a woman diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, I feel quite masculine in many of my personality traits. Confident, excitable, unafraid, strong and opinionated” (p10). In Heather’s case, her diagnosis of Asperger syndrome gave her an opportunity to engage with and express “masculine traits” that she argues traditional gender norms prevent young women from displaying, highlighting how young women “get thought of as annoying for talking, or bossy for leading” (ibid). She expresses sympathy for efforts by trans campaigners to challenge “gender stereotypes” (ibid). Heather suggests that in the future the ways that people are gendered will undergo radical change, as people come to see how “branding literally anything that is not genitalia or medical specifics “extremely male” or extremely female” is just restricting the potential of many, for no real outcome” (ibid). In this case, influential representations of autism as masculine are shown to be helpful to some autistic young people in terms of exploring gender in non-conforming ways. Such a perspective shows that not all autistic people automatically reject dominant biomedical discourses regarding autism. At the same time, Heather’s account can be read as being in sympathy with the wider goals of the neurodiversity movement, highlighting the possibilities for alliances with other movements for social change regarding gender and sexuality. Her account, like other contributions, concurs with a line from Sarra, who states what is in effect is the zine’s overriding message: “Start by seeing us as people not as weirdly gendered minds and, we’ll go from there” (p43).

Concluding Remarks

The texts examined in this chapter function as platforms for putting forward alternative representations of autistic people’s experiences as gendered and sexual subjects to those offered by dominant accounts. Such texts challenge assumptions regarding autistic people’s capacities to engage in romantic and sexual relationships, and illustrate the realities of autistic people’s gender variance and sexual non-conformity. Instead of autistic people being represented as suffering from biological deficits which prevent them from forming relationships, or which cause them to suffer forms of gendered and sexual disorder, such accounts present autistic people's diverse manifestations of gender and sexuality as being legitimate. At the same time, many of these contributions openly contest the social environments in which autistic people find themselves, with the norms and institutions of such environments portrayed as the primary cause of their distress. As the contributions of those such as Joyce and G highlight, these norms and institutions, whether they be heterosexual marriage or schooling, are not necessarily hospitable for autistic people in the contemporary moment. Efforts by autistic people to change themselves to fit into them, such as performing heterosexuality and normative femininity, prove difficult in practice. Efforts to conform to such norms often result in forms of psycho-emotional distress for autistic people, particularly those who are women, gender variant, and LGBTQ.

In my view, these texts provide notable examples of the ways in which the neurodiversity movement has created space for forms of alternative knowledge regarding autistic experiences of gender and sexuality to be produced and distributed. Rather than autistic people having to primarily consult resources and expertise intended for them by non-autistic people, texts which frequently represent them in pathologising, essentialist, and infantilising terms, such texts offer means by which autistic people can learn about diverse autistic experiences and develop their own perspectives. In a contemporary moment in which autistic people's experiences continue to be dismissed, as demonstrated in many of the contributions explored in this chapter, such alternative texts prove invaluable in supporting autistic self-advocacy. Dominant representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects are not purely theoretical matters, but are ones which, as this thesis has demonstrated, prove detrimental to autistic people, particularly those who live in opposition to disablist, heteronormative, and gendered social norms. The texts considered here not only provide those marginalised by dominant framings with opportunities to critique contemporary oppression, but also point to the ways in which autistic people experience greater well-being in social environments where they are accepted for who they are as gendered and sexual subjects.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Introductory Remarks

This thesis has explored a range of materials produced within the Anglosphere over the course of the last thirty years in order to develop a critical sociological account of how autistic people have been represented as gendered and sexual subjects in the UK. In the process, the thesis has explored the implications of these representations for autistic people's lives. In doing so, I have examined a sample of a wide range of texts. Such texts have included self-help books, television drama, and activist collections. As explored over the course of the thesis, the framings of autistic people's experiences of gender and sexuality in these texts have proven significantly divergent in nature. Certain texts produce or reproduce pathologising, infantilising, and essentialist depictions of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects. The hostile portrayals of autistic gender variant people in journalistic and academic commentary examined in Chapter 6 offer notable examples of such texts. Other texts, such as the self-advocate literature considered in Chapter 7, offer alternative representations which challenge these influential framings. These texts speak to and reflect the experiences of autistic people marginalised by these framings, such as autistic women and LGBTQ people.

The analysis in this thesis has developed a more socially informed account of autistic people's experiences as gendered and sexual subjects. Intervening in ongoing debates and controversies, my account rejects attempts to understand autistic people's experiences which are essentialist, infantilising, or pathologising in nature. Based upon the results of my textual analysis, it is clear that elements of contemporary scientific and popular literature frequently represent autistic people in such harmful terms. In contrast, my own account demonstrates the multifaceted ways in which autism, gender, and sexuality intersect as aspects of people's personal identities. My account challenges influential biomedical, psychological, and cultural representations which fail to recognise the diverse experiences of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects. By engaging in textual analysis I have been able to highlight the diversity of such experiences and at the same time offer a more sociological account of the ways in which autistic people experience gender and gender within contemporary social environments.

As part of my analysis, I acknowledge that some autistic people experience and express gender and sexuality in normative ways. Normative portrayals of autistic sexuality and gender, such as the extreme male brain framework discussed in Chapter 2 or the portrayal of autistic heterosexuality in *Atypical* analysed in Chapter 5, may speak to some autistic people's experiences. At the same time, this thesis shows that autistic people who live gender and sexuality outside of dominant terms frequently experience such framings and the implications they have as oppressive, harmful, and disabling. As highlighted by texts analysed in Chapters 4, 6, and 7, autistic people have developed and circulated their own accounts of their diverse gender and sexual experiences. Self-advocate accounts critique social norms and cultural representations, and in my view can help to inform future critical social research aligned with the neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2014).

This concluding chapter reviews the key research questions considered in this thesis in light of the textual material synthesised and the analysis developed. I provide an overview of the ways in which autistic people have been represented as sexual and gendered subjects in the texts, analysing the implications of such representations for autistic people. In the process, I consider the extent to which biomedical framings of autistic experience have been reproduced in the more popular texts analysed in the sample. I examine the ways in which autistic-self authored literature has contested and informed popular representations, and consider the implications of such work for developing alternative forms of representation within academic research. I proceed to consider some the limitations of my own inquiry and the possibilities for future research based on my findings. The chapter concludes with some reflections on conditions facing autistic people at the present time and possibilities for future social change.

Research Findings

My account has synthesised work from neurodiversity, disability, queer, trans, and feminist scholarship and activism in order to develop a critical account of how autistic people are represented as gendered and sexual subjects and the implications of such representations for autistic people's lives. In doing so, my interdisciplinary analysis has reformulated autism away from a biomedical category primarily defined by deficits. I have instead developed an account of autism which understands it as an aspect of people's identities, one which is experienced within particular social contexts. As highlighted by neurodiversity scholars such as Milton (2012a, 2012b), these contexts are informed by social relations which are not of autistic people's own choosing. Social norms and institutions, including those related to gender and sexuality, negatively affect autistic people in various ways. In this respect, autistic people are socially disabled by their environments, with biomedical, psychological, and cultural representations of their experiences playing a significant role in such disablement. As this thesis has highlighted, autistic people's experiences as gendered and sexual subjects are affected by these representations in predominantly negative ways. Influential framings of autistic sexuality and gender often present troubling and harmful implications for autistic people's lives. These framings, as my textual analysis demonstrates, frequently pathologise, infantilise, and essentialise autistic people as sexual and gendered subjects. In doing so, they marginalise and erase autistic people's diverse experiences.

In these respects, this thesis has actively intervened in the framings of autistic people's experiences in psychological and biomedical terms, highlighting the limitations and consequences of such representations. In this way, the thesis is contributing to contemporary debates and struggles that are seeking to reframe autism as a category, paying more attention to the lived experiences of autistic people. Such re-framings promote multiple, more specific socially informed accounts of autistic life. I have been particularly concerned with re-framings which take seriously the key roles of gender and sexuality in autistic people's experiences. This thesis has argued that engaging with the representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects is necessary for adequately understanding the social barriers and difficulties facing autistic people in the contemporary United Kingdom. In turn, the experiences of these autistic people as analysed in this thesis have implications for the experiences of autistic people in other parts of the world.

In the textual analysis carried out over the course of this thesis, several major findings have been uncovered by my research. Firstly, my inquiry demonstrates through analysis of various popular texts that psychological and biomedical framings of autistic people remain prevalent in the contemporary moment, presenting material implications for autistic people's lives. Such framings are connected to the oppression of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects. The nature of these framings vary from text to text, with these representations facing challenges even in texts produced by neurotypical clinical and medical professional authors. In this way, contemporary texts by non-autistic writers can be seen to feature contradictory elements, as pathologising representations of autistic people are reproduced and troubled by such authors.

The texts analysed in this thesis demonstrate that the contemporary moment has witnessed a proliferation of accounts of autistic gender and sexuality throughout the public sphere which are critical of dominant framings. As this inquiry highlights, autistic people themselves play a significant role in developing and promoting alternative representations. Over the course of recent decades, autistic self-authored literature has spoken back to influential framings of autistic people. Autistic people with experiences of gender and sexuality historically unacknowledged in biomedical and popular accounts have been able to advocate their own perspectives. In doing so, they have consistently challenged the limitations and implications of influential depictions of autistic people. These autistic perspectives, which align with the neurodiversity paradigm, offer positive implications for future research. I argue that such perspectives challenge biomedicalisation and inform more sociological accounts of autistic people's experiences which can inform future self-advocacy.

In a related fashion, increased autistic self-activity means that self-help literature and works of popular fiction have increasingly engaged with a wider range of autistic people's experiences. Neurotypical authors recognise that autistic people are not inherently asexual or masculine, whilst mainstream publishers such as Jessica Kingsley Publishers have provided opportunities for autistic authors to promote their own perspectives regarding gender and sexuality. A wider range of autistic voices has been granted a platform to offer their own views on autistic sexuality and gender. As a result, representations of autistic people's experiences as gendered and sexual subjects which challenge established framings have been able to circulate in the public sphere, with a greater capacity to inform the views of both autistic and non-autistic readers.

Debates and controversies surrounding the greater public visibility of autistic people in recent decades have produced several sociological accounts which are nominally critical in nature, including in their engagements with autistic gender and sexuality. As my textual analysis demonstrates, the authors of such accounts themselves frequently erase and marginalise the experiences and perspectives of autistic people in the process of developing their own critiques. As a result, I argue that such approaches suffer from significant limitations when compared to theoretical and activist work produced by autistic self-advocates and neurodiversity scholars.

The Limits of Influential Representations

The analysis of textual materials carried out in this thesis has consistently shown how biomedical and psychological representations of autistic people characterise autistic people in terms of their defects. The terms of the ICD and DSM definitions of autism, which centre on autistic people's impairments and repetitive behaviours, as well as psychological framings of autistic people as being mindblind and inherently masculine, are reproduced across various texts. Such framings are not uncritically reproduced in all these texts, with certain texts explored in this inquiry showing the ways in which these framings have been troubled by neurotypical people. Self-help authors analysed in Chapter 4, for example, reject elements of these framings. These influential representations have also been contested by autistic people themselves, as in the case of the self-advocate writings examined in Chapter 7. In these respects, biomedical and psychological representations of autistic people remain prevalent in the contemporary UK, but are subject to modifications and challenges as they circulate throughout popular discourse.

As this thesis demonstrates, the disablement of autistic people is connected to forms of gendered and sexual oppression. Social norms regarding ability intersect with sexual and gendered norm, as argued by scholars such as McRuer (2006) and Kafer (2013). This is most evident in the cases of autistic people who face marginalisation on account of their gender and sexuality. As highlighted in this thesis, autistic people who deviate from gendered and sexual norms face particular forms of pathologisation and infantilisation. The moral panic surrounding gender variant autistic youth, explored in Chapter 6 of this inquiry, offers a notable illustration of the effects of such harmful representations. In this case, autistic youth who experience gender in non-normative ways are represented as unable to understand their own identities as gendered subjects, legitimising medical gatekeeping and hostile attitudes towards them.

As McGuire (2016) highlights, pathologising representations of autistic people present in biomedical and popular discourse have historically legitimised efforts to cure and eliminate their impairments, often harming them in the process. None of the texts featured in my sample advocate for the curing of autistic people, the most direct expression of the "rehabilitative futurism" (Mollow, 2012, p288) which treats disabled people purely in biomedical terms and seeks to eliminate them from society. At the same time, many of the texts I have analysed contain elements which risk presenting autistic people in such terms, resulting in troubling implications for autistic people's well-being. My analysis of the textual sample demonstrates that representations of autistic people featured in some contemporary texts reproduce a medicalised approach to autistic people's experiences, one which is primarily focused on managing their apparent impairments.

Nichols et al.'s 2009 book *Girls Growing Up on the Autism Spectrum: What Parents and Professionals Should Know About the Pre-Teen and Teenage Years*, considered in Chapter 4 of this thesis, offers a notable example of the limitations of such a medical approach. As noted earlier in the thesis, the text advises parents and carers to encourage autistic girls and young women to "dress neatly and presentably and within the loosely defined boundaries of what is considered acceptable for youth their age" (p145) as a means of protecting them from disablist bullying. For some readers, such advice may appear benign in nature. If, as the co-authors suggests, autistic young girls can avoid school bullying through adjusting their appearance and behaviours, then encouraging them to do so can be interpreted positively. At the same time, such a framing of autistic people as needing to adjust to social norms must be critically engaged with. As demonstrated by my analysis in Chapter 4, such work downplays the need to confront the harms of oppressive social conditions and risks pathologising autistic people for their behaviours. Autistic people are represented in terms of their impairments, rather than their experiences being adequately situated within social contexts which impact their lives. In the case of Nichols et al.'s text, the co-authors may intend to support autistic girls and young women, but their approach implicitly reproduces a biomedical model which focuses on the defects of autistic girls and therefore does little to change the social contexts which disable them. As highlighted by the negative psycho-emotional effects of masking autistic behaviours discussed earlier, efforts by autistic individuals to adjust to harmful social environments frequently come at a great personal cost. In this respect, medicalised representations of autistic people which centre on their impairments, even in cases where the authors otherwise challenge disablism, contribute to harmful pathologisation.

Biomedical and psychological framings of autistic people's experiences intersect with oppressive dimensions of sexuality and gender. Autistic people with experiences outside of the dominant terms of gender and sexuality face marginalisation and erasure. As I have argued throughout this thesis, such terms are reproduced in popular representations such as the extreme male brain framing. As many of the authors of texts explored in this thesis highlight, established framings traditionally acknowledge the particular experiences of autistic men, but at the same time struggle to recognise the distinct experiences of autistic women and gender variant people. Gender and sexual non-conformity in autistic people's lives are frequently represented as the consequence of their disorder. As highlighted in the analysis of the moral panic in Chapter 6, for example, the possibility that individuals may be both autistic and gender variant is denied, with gender variance blamed on autistic people's obsessive tendencies. In this way, a medical model approach to understanding autistic people which primarily focuses on their impairments, works alongside oppressive gender and sexual norms to disable autistic people. Biomedical representations contribute to the infantilisation of autistic people, further entrenching the disablism they face as they are denied their autonomy.

As highlighted by autistic people's voices in texts analysed in Chapters 6 and 7, such representations have material consequences for autistic people. Autistic people have their genders and sexualities stigmatised and often face barriers when accessing diagnoses and other forms of professional support. Harmful representations inform restrictions on autistic people's capacities and further contribute to the social oppression they face, particularly in the case of autistic women, gender variant people, and LGBTQ people. Autistic people are forced to adhere to normative terms of ability, gender, and sexuality, terms which actively harm them.

As noted in earlier chapters, knowledge produced about autism has predominantly taken place in the UK. The prevalence of biomedical framings within popular texts produced and distributed in the UK in the current moment is therefore likely to ensure that such representations of autistic experience continue to shape forms of expert and public knowledge in other parts of the world, with troubling implications for the lives of autistic people globally.

Troubled Representations

Re-formulations of biomedical and psychological framings of autistic people in the texts analysed in this thesis demonstrate that these framings are not uncritically reproduced as they circulate throughout public discourse. Texts authored by non-autistic people often rely on such framings, but in the process of discussing issues related to autism some authors modify or trouble such framings. In doing so, they take seriously autistic people's own experiences and integrate them into their own work, rather than simply imposing influential framings on autistic people's lives. Several of the self-help texts distributed by Jessica Kingsley Publishers analysed in Chapter 4 illustrate this. These texts, which explore autistic people's experience of growing up and forming intimate relationships, feature aspects which challenge essentialist and pathologising characterisations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects. Nichols et al.'s book explicitly challenges the psychological framing of autistic people as inherently masculine and defined by particular deficits promoted by Baron-Cohen (2004). Such work acknowledges that such influential representation fails to recognise the diverse gendered experiences of autistic people. In a similar way, Aston's 2014 book *The Other Half of Asperger Syndrome (Autism Spectrum Disorder) A Guide to Living in an Intimate Relationship with a Partner who is on the Autistic Spectrum* critically responds to framings of autistic people as incapable of participating in intimate and sexual relationships on account of their impairments. She argues that these texts problematically inform professional attitudes towards autistic people. In these ways, self-help texts which draw upon scientific and clinical research into autistic people do not uncritically reproduce biomedical and psychological framings of autistic people's experiences.

The analysis of *Atypical's* first two seasons in Chapter 5 demonstrates that contemporary fictional depictions of autistic people similarly trouble biomedical and psychological framings of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects. The series may to a great extent reproduce cultural representations of autistic people as geeks and savants, representations connected to biomedical framings of autistic people as socially impaired and obsessive, but at the same time other elements of the series actively challenge such representations. The portrayal of the empathic autistic character Amber, who interferes in Sam's university application process in the belief that this will help him, troubles representations of autistic people as unable to empathise with others, as suggested by the mindblindness framings of Frith (2003) and Baron-Cohen (1999). As highlighted in Chapter 5, the depiction of Sam's gender and sexuality in *Atypical* has clear limitations, particularly the framing of autistic sexuality in heteronormative terms. At the same time, framings of autistic people as inherently asexual and unemphatic are challenged by other elements of the drama. Viewers are shown that autistic people's sexual desires are legitimate and should be socially accepted, with Sam's relationship to Paige illustrating how autistic people can form intimate relationships with non-autistic people.

Contemporary Changes

Based upon the textual analysis in this thesis, I argue that autistic people are popularising alternative understandings of autistic sexuality and gender within the British public sphere through both mainstream texts and grassroots literature. Autistic people, including those who face marginalisation on account of their genders and sexualities, are able to promote their own perspectives to wider audiences of neurotypical and autistic readers. Work produced by autistic people exploring autistic people's experiences of gender and sexuality, including intimate relationships and resistance to oppressive norms, has formed a central part of this thesis' textual sample. Self-help literature produced by autistic people considered in Chapter 4 and autistic self-advocacy collections analysed in Chapter 7 provide notable examples of autistic people discussing their own experiences as gendered and sexual subjects. In the process, these texts challenge influential representations of autistic people. At the same time, several of the texts produced by non-autistic authors examined in Chapters 4 and 6 include autistic people's own voices, with personal accounts detailing the experiences of autistic women, gender variant people, and LGBTQ people featured within these texts.

Autistic self-authored texts analysed in my sample offer platforms for the expression of a wider range of autistic experiences than are usually present in conventional biomedical and psychological accounts. Such works promote more inclusive and socially-situated representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects. In the process, these texts create spaces for representing autistic people's experiences of gender and sexuality which do not adhere to dominant social and cultural terms. The autistic writers of these texts clearly demonstrate the diversity of autistic people's experiences as gendered and sexual subjects.

Accounts of gender variant and LGBTQ autistic people featured in Chapter 7, for example, demonstrate the ways in which stigmatised forms of gender and sexuality intersect with autism in autistic people's everyday lives. These accounts encourage neurotypical readers to recognise and accept autistic people's various forms of sexuality and gender, and provide resources for autistic people themselves to think about their own experiences of gender and sexuality. In my view, these texts effectively promote the neurodiversity movement's emphasis on acknowledging and valuing human difference and diversity.

Many of the autistic authors of these texts consider the ways in which social norms and environments, including those surrounding gender and sexuality, disable autistic people. Moving away from a primary focus on biological impairments, these texts actively critique social barriers and cultural norms which have negative consequences for autistic people. Such texts echo Milton's (2012a) framing of autism in terms of the double empathy problem, highlighting how social environments shaped and reproduced by non-autistic people create disabling conditions for autistic people. Accounts of autistic girls and women's experiences of psycho-emotional distress examined in Chapter 7 explicitly illustrate such social disablement. As they discuss their personal lives as autistic people, the contributors demonstrate how their experiences are determined by compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness, heteronormativity, and gender normativity. Personal struggles around matters of gender and sexuality, such as sustaining romantic heterosexual relationships and conforming to feminine norms, are represented as the result of social contexts. In my view, such texts support the neurodiversity movement's emphasis on changing social conditions and not autistic people themselves. At the same time, they promote more inclusive representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects. The inclusive representations featured in these texts situate autistic people's diverse sexual and gendered experiences in social contexts, suggesting that these contexts can and must be transformed.

In the process of offering these alternative representations, autistic people's own texts challenge influential representations of autistic people produced in scientific research and circulated throughout popular culture. Such representations are presented by these autistic authors as contributing to autistic people’s marginalisation. Influential framings are shown to inform harmful attitudes towards autistic people, for example, medical professionals’ scepticism regarding the legitimacy of autistic people’s sexual and gender variance. In this way, I argue that autistic people’s own texts, particularly self-advocacy literature, work to undermine and contest historical accounts framings produced by non-autistic experts. As a result, such texts can be considered manifestations of alternative autistic knowledge production, providing different frameworks for understanding autistic experience to both autistic and neurotypical readers.

As this thesis has highlighted, autistic knowledge production in recent decades has relied upon mainstream publishing outlets such as Jessica Kingsley Publishers to disseminate work which critiques established representations of autistic people and, in turn, promote neurodiversity perspectives. In my view, this publishing of more critical work by autistic authors on the part of established publishers such as Jessica Kingsley Publishers shows how autistic people's contestations of dominant framings are intervening in mainstream discussions, allowing for alternative representations to reach wider audiences and thereby shift popular attitudes. These interventions through mainstream publishing are complemented by the production and distribution of autonomously produced and open access texts autistic people themselves, as shown in Chapter 7. The latter texts are freed from the marketing needs and conventions of established publishers, and play a key role in speaking back to influential framings as they create new spaces for autistic people’s experiences of gender and sexuality to be articulated and shared.

Since the early 20th century, scientific and psychological research has frequently treated autistic people as the subjects of non-autistic people’s analysis. As described in Chapter 2, non-autistic experts have produced knowledge about autism as a disorder which has shaped influential literature such as the DSM and ICD. Such knowledge has in turn been circulated within the public sphere by and for non-autistic parents, carers, and professionals. Contributions to scientific and public discourse from autistic people themselves over the last thirty years, in the form of texts analysed in this thesis, demonstrate that autistic people are increasingly challenging the power relations present within such knowledge production and distribution. Autistic people's own expertise is emphasised in such texts, with the dominance of the perspectives of non-autistic medical professionals and researchers contested by autistic people's own accounts as they produce and distribute their own literature.

As highlighted in my analysis of self-help literature from Jessica Kingsley Publishers in Chapters 4 and 6, several texts written by non-autistic professional authors over the last two decades have included direct references to autistic people's own accounts of gender and sexuality, including contributions from autistic women and LGBTQ people. In this way, autistic people's own voices are included in ways which challenge influential framings. In addition, the presence of these autistic voices promotes more inclusive perspectives regarding autistic sexuality and gender to the parents, carers, and professionals who read such texts. Alongside the mainstream and neurodiversity activist publications produced by autistic authors, such texts play a significant role in shaping public knowledge about autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects in the UK and elsewhere.

In my view, the knowledge produced by autistic people themselves regarding gender and sexuality in both mainstream and self-advocacy literature offers possibilities for informing and improving academic research in the social sciences and humanities. Critiques of influential representations of autistic gender and sexuality, alongside alternatives representations of autistic people's gender and sexuality diversity, can inform sociological accounts of autistic people's experiences. Social contexts, including cultural representations which circulate within them, are revealed to be oppressive for autistic people by such theoretical work. Dominant framings of autistic people's experiences, as autistic texts in this sample highlight, marginalise many autistic people's own experiences and reinforce their marginalisation. This emphasis on cultural and social factors makes possible reformulations of autism itself away from biomedical and psychological terms towards more socially informed accounts which align with the neurodiversity movement's perspectives. Autistic people's own critical perspectives regarding dominant social norms and forms of scientific and cultural representation can be complemented by other forms of critical scholarship, such as work from queer theory and gender studies, in order to develop further analysis of contemporary social conditions facing autistic people in the hope of enacting social change. My own work as an autistic scholar in this thesis, situated within the neurodiversity paradigm and influenced by a range of fields in the humanities and social sciences, has attempted to develop such analysis by deploying existing theoretical frameworks and taking seriously autistic people's own experiences and perspectives regarding gender and sexuality. I argue that further engagements with the perspectives offered by autistic people's own work can productively develop other forms of critical scholarship in the humanities and social sciences.

Challenges to Critiques

As this thesis has demonstrated, the growing visibility of autistic people in the public sphere has generated theoretical and political challenges from certain quarters. Some of the most significant of these challenges have emerged from scholars working within the humanities and social sciences themselves. In this thesis I have analysed work from authors such as Timimi et al. (2011) and Davies-Arai (2018) which intervene in debates and controversies surrounding autistic people, including autistic people's experiences of gender and sexuality, and offer nominally critical and politicised perspectives. In my view, such challenges suffer from significant limitations, especially when these interventions are contrasted with the work of autistic self-advocates and neurodiversity scholars.

As demonstrated in Chapter 4, Timimi et al. point to the limitations of biological and psychological accounts of autism. Instead of embracing neurodiversity-based perspectives on these matters, however, the co-authors offer a crude social constructionist argument which simply dismisses the existence of autism as a state of being. As I argued in Chapter 4, the co-authors advocate a questionable analysis of the apparent social causes of autism. The co-authors challenge biomedical framings of autistic people and in doing so highlight how the diagnosis has been disproportionately gendered historically, but their conclusions prove to be flawed. Treating autism as simply a biomedical fiction imposed on boys and men by neoliberal society denies the lived experiences of autistic people of various genders, inadvertently reproducing the dominant framing of autism as a masculine condition. Such an account, which roots itself in sociological critique and anti-psychiatric analysis, fails to acknowledge that autistic-self advocates and neurodiversity campaigners have themselves developed alternative accounts of autistic experience which trouble the terms of biomedical categories and recognise the role of social factors. As Milton (Milton and Timimi, 2016) argues in an online discussion in response to Timimi's assertion that the neurodiversity movement reproduces "a medical model framework" (para1), Timimi's sociological critique fails to recognise that "critical autistic scholars" (para15) have themselves challenged biomedicalization. In my view, autistic self-advocate and neurodiversity work offers more theoretically sophisticated critiques of biomedical framings of autistic experience when compared to the work of Timimi et al..

In a similar way, feminist analysis regarding the relationship between autism and gender variance from Davies-Arai examined in Chapter 7 proves limited compared to neurodivergent perspectives. In her account, autistic young people are depicted as the passive victims of external social pressure from trans activists, with the possibility of autistic young people rejecting dominant gender norms and embracing gender variance effectively ruled out. Such an account, which presents itself as critical of biomedical interventions into children's lives, in practice reproduces pathologising and infantilising medical framings of autistic gender variant people as defective. In contrast, I argue that neurodiversity perspectives, such as that of neuroqueer scholars and activists (Walker, 2014) which highlight the connections between LGBTQ and gender variant challenges to gender and sexual norms and autistic self-advocacy against social disablism, offer a better approach to theorising autistic gender variance.

Returning to my use of postcritical work such as that of Sedgwick (2003) earlier in this thesis, I argue that such texts, which are presented as political interventions aimed at improving the lives of people affected harmful biomedicalization, offer paranoid readings of autistic people's experiences which prove analytically and politically counterproductive. By disregarding autistic people's own perspectives in their efforts to uncover harmful forms of social and ideological oppression, the authors of such texts reproduce framings of autistic experience which, as this thesis has shown, contribute to autistic people's marginalisation. Timimi et al.'s account reinforces the harmful notion that autism is an inherently masculine condition, whereas Davies-Arai's work reproduces an infantilising medical representation of autistic people as defective. As a result, I argue that neurodiversity perspectives based on autistic people's own experiences offer more politically and theoretically useful contributions to ongoing controversies and debates surrounding autism, gender, and sexuality. Such perspectives can be connected to wider struggles against oppressive social norms, facilitating the kinds of intersectional and coalitional political and theoretical work advocated for by scholars such as Kafer (2013) and Slater (2015).

Research Possibilities

As demonstrated by the textual analysis carried out in this thesis, more inclusive representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects which challenge influential pathologising framings have proliferated over the last thirty years. Established publishers such as Jessica Kingsley Publishers have recognised autistic people's perspectives on gender and sexuality and have provided space for their voices to be heard. Work carried out in this thesis demonstrates that although representations of autism as a biological disorder or inherently masculine condition remain influential in the domains of scientific research and popular culture, such representations increasingly face significant theoretical and political challenges from autistic people themselves. The emergence of more sociological accounts of autistic experience, alongside explorations of autistic people's resistance to gender and sexual norms, are the consequence of the production and distribution of alternative knowledge over recent decades. Independent publications and presses focused on autistic people's issues have emerged in the recent period, as highlighted in Chapter 7. Simultaneously, work informed by the neurodiversity paradigm increasingly gains influence in areas of academic research. Initiatives such as the Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC) (2020) have been able to gain institutional space to develop critical neurodiversity theoretical work, whilst at the same time remaining connected to grassroots self-advocacy.

My own analysis in this thesis has been indebted to such work, as I have drawn and built upon existing analysis from scholars and activists associated with the neurodiversity movement.

Based on the analysis and insights developed in this thesis, I offer several proposals for future areas of research. In advancing these proposals, I suggest various ways of developing and building upon the work of this thesis, including further explorations of the role of race and kinship in affecting autistic people's experiences.

This thesis has primarily considered autistic experiences of gender and sexuality through an exploration of scientific and cultural representations featured in various texts. In my view, race plays an important role in influential representations of autistic people, with autism often associated with whiteness. As noted in Chapter 3, autism has historically been a label applied to cases of children from white professional families. Factors ranging from popular cultural representations of autistic people as white to institutional barriers in education provision facing Black autistic people and autistic people of colour have worked "to construct autism as a white condition" (Heilker, 2012, para16) in the popular imaginary. My thesis has touched upon this issue in several chapters. In Chapter 5, for example, I highlighted the whiteness of the geek figure used to represent autistic people in popular culture, with *Atypical* reproducing and troubling such representation. Similarly, in Chapter 7 I noted the ways in which autistic self-advocacy texts platform the experiences of Black autistic people and autistic people of colour. As work by Black feminist scholars such as Crenshaw (1989) demonstrates, matters of social oppression are always interrelated and in this respect more comprehensive accounts of autistic experiences of gender and sexuality require sustained considerations of the role of race. Work by Black autistic self-advocates and autistic self-advocates of colour, such as the authors of *All the weight of our dreams: On living racialized autism* (Brown, Ashkenazy and Giwa-Onaiwu, 2017), have already highlighted the connections between these issues. I argue that such critical insights can inform future intersectional neurodiversity research.

A recurring element within the texts explored in this thesis has been the presence of neurotypical people's concerns with ensuring that autistic people, particularly autistic children, adhere to social norms around ability, gender, and sexuality. The moral panic regarding autistic gender variant children examined in Chapter 6 explicitly highlights such concerns. Autistic people's defects are represented as preventing them from complying with sexual and gender normativity, generating anxiety amongst parents, medical professionals, academics, and journalists. In my view, carrying out qualitative analysis of parental and professional views regarding autistic people's sexual and gender non-conformity through interviews and surveys would complement this thesis' textual analysis. Qualitative analysis of this nature could explore how such concerns manifest in domestic and institutional settings and examine how they inform the actions of neurotypical people towards autistic people.

Building upon the insight in this thesis that challenges to forms of normalcy can form the basis of political coalitions between autistic people and other marginalised groups, I think that neurodiversity scholarship would benefit from dialogue with feminist literature outlining critiques of current normative kinship structures, such as recent work by Sophie Lewis (2019). As this thesis has demonstrated, concerns with ensuring the reproduction of 'healthy' and 'normal' children frequently prove harmful to autistic people, particularly autistic women, gender variant people, and LGBTQ people. I argue that thinking through ways of developing more inclusive approaches to raising and supporting autistic young people is worth attempting in future research. Critical feminist scholarship by those such as Lewis focused on critiquing and transforming existing familial and kinship structures can help generate such approaches. Such research could inform better practices for helping autistic people to grow and develop, practices which reject the imposition of normative expectations around ability, gender, and sexuality and instead allow autistic people to express their differences.

In my view, it is imperative that there are adequate resources provided for the carrying out of future neurodiversity research, and that such research be developed in ways which draw upon and platform diverse ranges of autistic perspectives. PARC and similar initiatives are starting to do such valuable work but require much more support from educational institutions to facilitate participatory forms of research which draw upon self-advocate perspectives. Such research can develop more emancipatory forms of knowledge regarding autistic people's lives, including the development of more inclusive representations of autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects. Representations generated by such research, which acknowledge the gender and sexual diversity of autistic communities, can in turn inform wider academic research and popular culture and therefore shape public attitudes regarding autistic people in a positive direction.

Concluding Remarks

Influential representations of autistic people produced and reproduced across scientific research and popular culture face challenges as a result of the theoretical and political work of autistic people themselves. Representations which pathologise, infantilise, and essentialise autistic people as gendered and sexual subjects have been critiqued by autistic people, who highlight the limitations and harmful effects of such representations. Autistic people who have been historically marginalised or erased on account of their genders and sexualities have increasingly been able to speak back to such dominant framings and present their own experiences and perspectives. In doing so, they challenge intersecting forms of social oppression around disability, gender, and sexuality. Such struggles offer possibilities for creating social environments which are more accepting of difference, as called for by the neurodiversity movement. In turn, autistic people have struggled to shift the focus away from autistic people's impairments towards an analysis of autism as part of people's lived experiences within particular social contexts.

In this thesis I have made an intervention which clarifies aspects of the situation facing autistic people, particularly those with experiences of gender and sexuality that have been historically unaddressed and marginalised by influential representations. Challenging such representations and offering alternatives is important in helping to improve conditions for autistic people. Such challenges will hopefully mean that they are no longer pathologised or infantilised by medical professionals, parents, or wider society, or forced to adhere to oppressive sexual and gender norms. Social environments structured by the forces of disablism, gender, and sexuality negatively impact upon autistic people's lives, and it is important to change such environments through theoretical critique and political action.

Conditions facing autistic people in the UK, USA, and other parts of the world remain troubling, despite the efforts made by neurodiversity advocates to change them. Autistic people continue to experience various forms of oppression and discrimination, from intimate violence to incarceration, with those who are subject to further forms of oppression such as transmisogyny and racialisation suffering the most. As I acknowledged earlier in this thesis, cultural and discursive analysis on its own is insufficient in challenging the material oppression facing autistic people. There clearly remains further work to do to overcome such harmful conditions.

Even as I conclude this thesis, I must admit as an autistic scholars myself that autism remains a complicated object of analysis. As highlighted by Fitzgerald (2017), autism's causes and meaning remain uncertain. Future scientific developments and social changes, as Evans (2017) suggests, are likely to result in the neurodevelopmental disorder model featured within the current DSM and ICD becoming obsolete. The theoretical work and political activism of the neurodiversity movement will undoubtedly play a role in driving such changes. As an autistic scholar myself, I hope that future understandings of autism recognise the diverse lived experiences of autistic people of different genders and sexualities. Based on the material by autistic self-advocates that I have engaged with in this thesis, ones which effectively critique existing problematic and harmful representations, I am confident that future self-advocacy will work to change popular understandings and promote greater acceptance of diverse experiences.

In a contemporary moment marked by generalised social crises, neurodiversity activism and self-advocacy prove vital for overcoming oppression and creating better possibilities for autistic people. The work of this thesis marks my own contribution to efforts to address such pressing issues.

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