

“Neurotypicals are snowflakes, they get offended over the slightest thing”
Exploring how Adults on the Autistic Spectrum Experience Friendship with Neurotypicals

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Signed: Elliot Newton

Date: 02/10/2018

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate autistic people’s experience of friendship with neurotypicals, in an attempt to tackle the issue of social isolation for the autistic population. Participants (N=6) were recruited using social media and were invited to semi-structured interviews that focused on their lived experiences of being friends with neurotypicals and what they found helpful or difficult. The interviews produced vast amounts of rich data, which was then analysed using thematic analysis. The overarching themes that emerged were “Navigating Friendship”, “Means to and Authentic Self” and “Friendship as a Dependency”. One major concern of the participants was that neurotypicals do not understand autism, which prevents the development of friendship. Only when they feel understood, could they be their authentic selves. They made it clear that neurotypicals should not be offended by the things autistic people say, as they take pride in their honesty and may simply be trying to help. The participants felt it was important to let neurotypicals know that there is a fine line between supporting someone, and taking away their independence.

Introduction

Humans form friendships for a variety of reasons, and numerous researchers have attempted to understand the formation of friendships, but its elusive nature has deemed it to be a complex task (Sigstad, 2017).

Close friendship is said to be an emotional bond between two people who prefer to be around each other than anyone else, they enjoy their time together, share interactions and activities, and have considered themselves friends for a long period of time (Sigstad, 2017). Bauminger et al. (2008) said the distinguishing factors of a friendship are: companionship,

intimacy-trust, and affection. Maclean (2016) describes friendship as a “haven”, characterised by trust and intimacy which form the “central coordinates” of our lives.

Why Friendships Form

One theory of why friendships form, is that they provide numerous benefits to the individual, including unique opportunities to learn about ourselves and how one is seen by a caring and equal other (Bukowski & Sippola, 2005). This is reiterated by Maclean (2016), who stated that having friends in an increasingly impersonal world brings a sense of ontological security, strengthening our understanding of ourselves.

One key benefit of friendship is that it helps people overcome negative experiences such as abuse or trauma (Bukowski & Sippola, 2005). Sigstad (2017) supports this highlighting friendship supports stress management by aiding coping and adjustment skills. Dunbar (2018) extends this benefit to external threats as friends can provide support emotionally, morally, economically, and practically. This could take the form of defending someone from a dangerous situation or lending them money to avoid financial hardship.

Research has found that people who have more intimate relationships demonstrate good perspective taking skills, and perceived closeness and reciprocity in their relationships (Sigstad, 2017). This shows that the more experience someone has with close friendship, the better their ‘friend-skills’, which can only be learned through experience. Positive relationships promote prosocial skills, and contribute to social competence, however if these skills cannot be practised amongst peers it will be difficult to achieve a satisfactory level (Sigstad, 2017).

How Friendships Form

The way friendships form varies throughout life, as do the opportunities to form them. As children, ‘concrete’ factors such as shared interests are the basis of friendships (Potter, 2014). These factors are most commonly used to initiate friendships as they are the most obvious and easily identifiable. This could explain why homophily is one of the main

predictors of friendship (Utz & Jankowski, 2016) for people of any age, however unconscious this may be.

Maclea (2016) calls friendships 'chosen' relationships, usually forged with people of our own gender and social status. Race and ethnicity are said to be the strongest predictors of friendship formation, followed by same age, religion, level of education, occupation and gender (Utz & Jankowski, 2016). This suggests that people are more likely to be friends with someone they perceive to have similarities with, such as ethnicity or age, but leaves no explanation for why people are sometimes friends with people who are very different from themselves. Research has found that children do not see difference as much as adults and are more likely to form a friendship with someone of a different social division (Vincent, Neal & Iqbal, 2016). This contradicts the idea that children usually initiate friendships based on concrete factors such as homophily (Potter, 2014), indicating there may be a deeper process happening beneath what is observable.

With age, friendships become increasingly important (Sigstad, 2017). During adolescence, boys tend to favour playing in large groups with well-defined dominance hierarchies, usually engaging in rough and tumble play and sports activities (Rose & Rudolph, 2006), as having a larger friendship circle is beneficial in that it can help reduce bullying. A large part of socialisation and shaping development is the friendship group or 'clique', as this fulfils the need to be around similar others and the need to belong to a group, so friends within these groups are considered to be the most important peers in an adolescent's life (Closson & Watanabe, 2018). This grouping process usually happens in school, when young people are in large numbers and have various options for potential friendships, but for adults, the workplace is where many friendships are formed (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

However, adults have been found to experience some level of anxiety about being in close contact with others not like themselves (Vincent, Neal & Iqbal, 2016). This will inevitably make it harder for adults to make friends as this anxiety can shrink their list of potential friendship candidates. Unlike children, who were said to be more open to people different from themselves, adult's reliance on homophily seems to detract from Potter's (2014)

generous idea that with age, more complex cognitive processes such as empathic understanding and intimate exchanges become more important.

Because of the rise of the internet and social networking sites, friendship's definition has changed, and its formation seems contextual to the platform. Facebook friends are not the same as 'real' friends, and can be everything ranging from a close friend to a complete stranger (Utz & Jankowski, 2016). However, simply because two people met each other through online socialising platforms, does not mean their relationship or friendship is not valid, only non-traditional and perhaps a reflection of the rise of virtual interactions with others.

Exploring such virtual interactions, Utz and Jankowski (2016) stated that much less is known about unsuccessful attempts at friendship, so they tracked friend requests on an online gaming platform and argued that preferential attachment drove acceptance rates more than homophily. Players who had more in-game currency and experience received more friend requests than players who were dressed similarly or shared the same in game race. This could be used to explain why victims of bullying tend to be unpopular boys (Closson & Watanabe, 2018), as they have less socially valued resources at their disposal.

Even though some people now meet through online 'virtual' platforms, many friendships still form in the traditional way, between two people through in-person interactions, sharing a common interest or activity (Closson & Watanabe, 2018).

Social Isolation and Friendship

Because many adults make friends at work (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015), unemployment is a large factor in social isolation or lack of friendships, and in some cases, can lead to depression. In South Korea, decreasing unemployment rates have been shown to decrease suicide rates (Huang & Ho, 2016). American research states that social isolation and loneliness are in fact increasing in society and should be considered a public health concern (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Affluent nations have the highest levels of individuals living alone and have reached what is likely the highest they have ever been in human history, and are

still increasing with reports stating that loneliness will reach epidemic proportions by 2030 unless action is taken (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

Bauminger et al. (2008) found loneliness was reported in the absence of friendship, which is no surprise. However, there are some people who may actually have regular social contact, but still feel loneliness (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Interestingly, there can also be people who feel content with minimal social contact and actually prefer to be alone (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015), however this may not be good for the individual in the long term.

Friendship is actually said to be beneficial to physical and mental health, as social isolation is as deadly as smoking, obesity and lack of exercise (Holt-Lunstad, Smith & Layton, 2010). Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015) more broadly stated that individuals lacking social connections are at risk of premature mortality, not only people who were socially isolated but also the lonely. These findings highlight the importance of tackling social isolation, as there are many populations who suffer from this fixable societal problem. According to National Health Service (NHS) statistics, one population who are regularly reported as experiencing social isolation and loneliness is the disabled community.

The United Kingdom government's office for disability issues (2014) shared a document which specified that over 11 million people in the UK had a disability at the time of the writing, and disabled people were less likely to participate in cultural, leisure and sports activities. Moreover, it showed that 19% of disabled people had been treated unfairly at work and 39% of 16-34-year-old disabled people have been a victim of a crime ("Disability facts and figures", 2014). All factors which contribute to the ongoing social isolation of disabled people.

NHS Adult Social Care statistics (2016) showed that only 5.8% of adults with learning disabilities were in paid employment in England, meaning they do not have this opportunity to form social connections. Only 32.6% of adults with learning disabilities said they had adequate social contact, and 5.6% said they had little or no social contact and were considered socially isolated ("Measures from the Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework", 2016). This suggests that unemployment is having a large impact on the amount of social

isolation for people with a learning disability. Many of these people will identify as being autistic.

Autism and Friendship

Some autistic people have difficulties with communication, meaning friendship can be challenging to initiate (Sigstad, 2017). Prejudice and discrimination can occur towards disabled people which they often are aware of, leading to negative self-evaluations and feelings of powerlessness and frustration. This can impact their overall quality of life in other areas including education, employment, housing and everyday interactions with the public (McManus, Feyes & Saucier, 2010).

Friendship in children with autism is a neglected area of research (Bauminger et al., 2008), and is necessary to provide future provisions for lonely young autistic people. Autistic children, who are developing the skills necessary to make friends, find it difficult even in elementary and middle school (Chang, Shih & Kasari, 2016), where they are surrounded by many potential friendship candidates. Californian researchers found 20% of elementary aged children with Autism in mainstream classrooms reported having reciprocal relationships, compared to 60% of neurotypical (NT) children in the same class (Chang, Shih & Kasari, 2016). Autistic people have reported having the most friends as children, with the majority of autistic adolescents and adults reporting very few if any friends (Chang, Shih & Kasari, 2016).

It is possible that because autistic people are not experienced in equal relationships, they have trouble understanding the emotional aspects of how to be and take care of friends (Sigstad, 2017). Many autistic people have experience of relationships with paid professionals, such as personal assistants and psychologists, which are unequal. If these relationships have been the majority of their social experience, then they have not had the same opportunities to learn the unwritten rules of friendship. Unlike a relationship with a paid professional, there are no contracts or rules that bind us to our closest friends, we simply have to trust them (Maclean, 2016). Autistic people can sometimes have trouble

understanding other people's thoughts, desires and feelings (Bauminger et al., 2008), so understanding social rules can be difficult.

Sumiya et al. (2018) conducted a study and interviewed autistic Japanese teenagers about "masking" strategies they employ, such as pretending to be following a conversation or letting friends win card games. One said it was so they would be favoured and praised, and another spoke about being worried about losing friends as he only had a limited number, resulting in social anxiety and exhaustion. This added pressure to his relationships as he was constantly forcing himself to try and behave "properly". Autistic people spend prodigious amounts of time forcing themselves to meet predominant neurotype demands and expectations (Woods, 2017).

Children with autism are three times more likely to be bullied than their NT peers (Sumiya, Igarashi & Miyahara, 2018). Higashida (2015), a non-verbal autistic writer says that adults can sometimes admonish victims of bullying and laugh it off, suggesting worse things could happen. He advises that young people should not need to practise being bullied or have to develop endurance superpowers.

Inclusive Practice

Physical presence in a group is not enough to constitute inclusion, as meaningful interactions are necessary, and help autistic children feel connected to the rest of the group. For example, one autistic boy said when he was playing tag with some other students, they left him out, which made him feel lonely (Sumiya, Igarashi & Miyahara, 2018). This demonstrates that simply being in contact with NTs is not enough to have positive outcomes, as the quality of contact is an important factor to consider.

High quality interactions with intellectually disabled people have been shown to have an impact on the way they are perceived by NTs, decreasing hostility and anxiety, increasing inclusive attitudes (McManus, Feyes & Saucier, 2010). Inclusive, person-centred interventions such as 'Circle of Friends' have been employed as a form of intentional relationship building, involving the formation of a small group around someone isolated,

leading to a more fulfilled life (Newton & Wilson, 2006). This simple intervention is based on the five service accomplishments identified by O'Brien (1989) that every person should be entitled to are; sharing ordinary places, contributing, choice and control, having the dignity of valued social roles (belonging), and growing in relationships (being someone).

Arguably, the only true "experts" in the field (Kluth, 2003), are actual autistic people. Higashida has been very clear that autistic people want to be social, and value the company of others (Grandin, 2014). Higashida (2015) advises that friendship cannot be artificially created, that it must occur naturally and should be based on respect and mutual support. He acknowledges the value of friendship, but requests that people stop pressuring children to make friends and reassures that having no friends is nothing to be ashamed of (Higashida, 2015).

Sigstad (2017) said more in-depth qualitative research is required to understand different perspectives of friendship and what it means, concerns about friendship and its qualities. Descriptions of the qualities of friendship have shown a discrepancy between NT and neurodivergent people and elaboration is required to deepen understanding of this from an inside perspective (Sigstad, 2017).

Current Study

This study aims to expand the current knowledge of this perspective. The focus was also to gather understanding of what NTs can do to make life easier for autistic people, which if implemented properly could have an effect on the social isolation of autistic people as a whole and promote an inclusive, nurturing culture supportive of neurodiversity.

Aims

This study aims to explore the experiences of friendship for autistic people, from their own perspective. This information will be used to suggest better ways of supporting people with autism with the formation of friendships.

Objectives

The study will employ semi-structured interviews to explore the concepts mentioned above. Interviews will be recorded and investigated using thematic analysis to determine themes from within the interviews.

METHOD

Participants

Six participants identifying as autistic aged 24-52 were recruited from the United Kingdom for the study. Of these, two identified as female and four as male. Five of the participants communicated verbally and openly engaged with the researcher in a face to face interview, however one participant responded to the interview questions via email correspondence which produced rich data and has been incorporated in the research.

Materials

The interview was designed to be semi-structured, revolving around 12 key questions (Appendix 3). The interview questions were pre-written, and chosen with the research supervisor to ensure academic rigour. The initial questions relate to establishing a definition of friendship from an autistic person's perspective, followed by more specific questions about existing friendships, and what features of those relationships makes them easier or more difficult. One question asks if friendship is important, which relates to the idea that autistic people want to be social and value the company of others (Grandin, 2014), and was asked to explore the variances of opinion within the autistic community. The next few questions are related to how the participant would prefer non-autistic people to behave around them, leading to data that is useful for building future interventions.

Recruitment

The recruitment process began by posting an invitation to participate on Twitter, providing the researchers email address and some basic information (Figure 1). Participants had not been personally invited or offered anything in return for their participation. Twitter allowed the message to be shared around the world, and extended far beyond the physical contacts known to the researcher. Various autism charities and organisations, parents, and university staff retweeted the post, which gained a lot of support and 125 people engaged with the tweet. Not enough participants had been gathered due to the initial tweet, so a follow up message was posted (Figure 2). The follow up post was worded in a much more accessible and friendly manner, ensuring people of all levels of literacy were able to comprehend it, utilising a GIF image which was playful and engaging.

The majority of the participants were recruited via Twitter, however, more were required. One of the participants requested that their interview was undertaken at a Leeds charity for autistic people. While there, two individuals with autism enquired about what the researcher was doing, and asked if they could take part in the study as well.

Tweet Activity

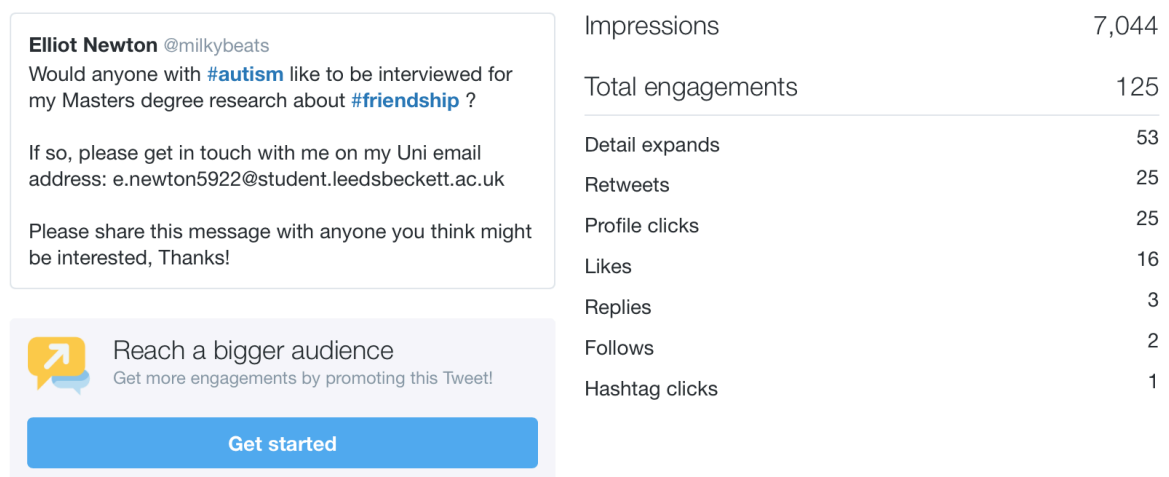


Figure 1. Initial Twitter post inviting participants to take part, including number of engagements

Tweet Activity

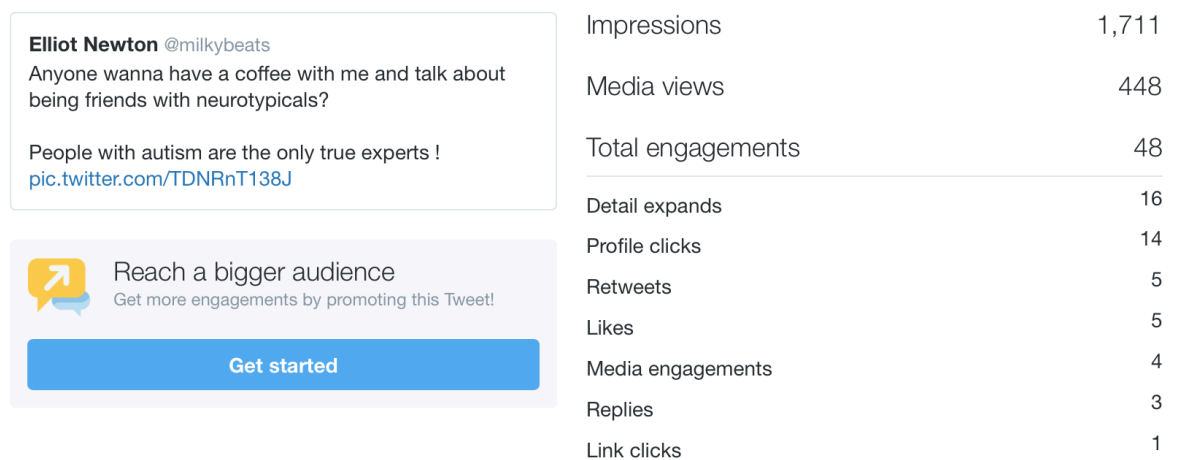


Figure 2. Follow up Twitter post including number of engagements.

Procedure

Once contact had been established with the individual participants, the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 1) was sent to the participant via email to give the participants a better understanding of the study. This document included information such as what the project was about, what participants would be asked to do, the advantages and potential disadvantages of participation, how the data will be kept confidential, their right to withdraw, and further contact information. If the participant wanted to take part in the study, a location and time was agreed upon to conduct the interview. All of the interviews were undertaken in a public place, which was well lit and deemed free from potential danger hazards within reason.

Upon arrival, the participant was provided with the participant information sheet again, and the researcher went through it with the participant to ensure they fully understood what was expected of them, giving the participant an opportunity to ask any questions about the research. It was vital that the participants understood their right to withdraw data and that their data would be stored confidentially and encrypted on the researcher's personal

computer hard drive. Then, a pseudonym was chosen by each participant that they would be referred to throughout the entire study, assuring the participant of confidentiality.

Once the researcher and participant had gone through the information sheet together, the Consent Form (Appendix 2) was presented. During this initial conversation, the researcher established that the participant identified as being autistic, and evaluated their communication ability so that the following correspondence could be tailored accordingly. The researcher aimed to be aware of each participant's individual needs, and accommodate for them as much as possible.

The study implemented semi-structured interviews, and proceeded in an informal fashion to make sure the participants were comfortable. The audio was recorded via an iPhone using the Voice Memos app, which was placed on the table, and the recordings were encrypted on the iPhone until being transferred directly to the researcher's personal computer for transcription. The questions were stored on an iPad which was placed on the table in front of the researcher during each interview, out of sight of the participant. The researcher read the participants body language to discern whether it was time to move on to the next pre-written question, or to facilitate with a follow up question.

Once the interviews were complete, the participants were reminded of their right to withdraw the data from the study. The interview audio was then transferred to the researcher's computer as an mp3. file and then transcribed using Microsoft Word. Once the transcription had been completed they were converted to PDF documents to be analysed using Thematic Analysis.

Data analysis

The PDF transcript documents were analysed using the six-phase Nowell et al. (2017) technique, which is designed to establish trustworthiness at each phase of the Thematic Analysis process. The first phase of analysis is familiarisation with the data, which includes reading through the transcripts several times, organising the raw data, and keeping a reflexive journal. The second phase is to generate initial codes (e.g. being taken advantage

of, knowing who to trust), whilst keeping a record of the framework as it develops. The third phase is searching for themes (e.g. benefits of friendship, being understood), diagramming and triangulating data to establish a hierarchy and connections between concepts and themes. The fourth phase is to review the themes, again triangulating the data to make sure the themes and subthemes are referentially adequate. This phase also includes vetting by the research supervisor to review the themes and subthemes, which leads to the next phase, reaching an agreement on the names of the themes, keeping a record of the naming process. Three major themes emerged – ‘Means to an Authentic Self’, ‘Navigating Friendship’, and ‘Friendship as a Dependency’. The sixth and final phase of data analysis is producing the report, which requires thick contextual detail, descriptions of process of coding and analysis, and reasons for theoretical, analytical and methodological choices throughout entire study.

RESULTS

1. NAVIGATING FRIENDSHIP

The first major theme was entitled ‘Navigating Friendship’, where participants talked about the difficulties in knowing where to draw the line between a friend and an acquaintance, especially when paid professionals and other ‘atypical’, perhaps unbalanced relationships are involved. Within this theme definitions, levels and rules of friendship from the participants experience featured strongly.

What is a friendship?

Within navigating friendship, the first sub-theme to emerge was ‘what is a friendship?’ This is demonstrated in the quote below:

Extract 1:

“If I had to decide by myself, it’d be when people talk to you a lot, reach out to you, want to spend time with you, those sorts of things I would use as cues now”

(Frank)

Frank talked about how he didn't know when friendships had been formed until someone told him, and reflected on the behaviours he would use in the future as cues. Another participant Krisali mentioned friendship should be based on 'choiceful contact', and went on to say she trusts her dog loves her more than any human does, accepting that her dogs love for her was based on being cared for appropriately. Krisali has found a predictable, honest relationship with her dog, which she says is more loving than any of her relationships with humans.

Other ideas of what friendship is included sharing interests, building a bond and getting along with someone. Richard said friendship was "someone to share concerns with and get advice from, but in an unpaid capacity". Specifying that friendship is an unpaid relationship makes it clear that Richard has spent a lot of time with professionals throughout his life and wants to distinguish between those and 'real friendships'. He stated, "initiating friendship is difficult" as it involves caring enough about the other person without being paid, and "without any reason to". He mentioned that "there is no true altruism", and that people get something out of helping people or being friends with someone even if they don't realise it. This perspective indicates that Richard agrees that friendship is a reciprocal relationship, which should be unpaid and balanced.

Frank described being able to form friendships as a "luxury" that not everyone has, meaning people that do have it should not take it for granted and think about its value as a complex social ability. It was clear that the participants viewed friendship as a subjective, experiential concept that varied from person to person, and overall the participants definitions of friendship were centred around receiving support and protection, being honest and trustworthy, being listened to and understood.

Levels of friendship

Friendship can be seen as having different levels (acquaintances, friends, best friends), but knowing where to draw the line between levels was described as difficult for the

participants. Richard said, “I don’t have friends I have acquaintances”, and Frank said, “my friendships have been very surface”, indicating an awareness of the levels of friendship. It seems that it is the navigation between these levels which is experienced as complicated. Frank said one of his current friends helped him identify that he had formed a new friendship, which he had no idea about before being told.

Extract 2:

“It came after a very long time, you spend that much time with somebody you get to know them that well – you just end up in that place anyway”

(Frank)

Frank usually pushed people away and his friendships have always been very “surface”. However, he allowed someone to get past the guard of his personality, and ended up in “that place”. This person became a very close friend to Frank, and stood by him even when he “drove them crazy”. This highlights the importance of proximity and stability, and being around someone long enough to solidify the friendship.

Interestingly, Emma spoke about finding out that some of her friends were really acquaintances after they broke her trust, and treated her badly. This view implies that Emma understood friendships as linear, with friends never falling out, and as having trust as the sole criteria. From Emma’s perspective, if trust is broken you are no longer her friend.

Cainnech mentioned moving around a lot whilst growing up, and remembered playing with a boy who lived up the road who he considered a friend, even though he barely saw him. Cainnech’s perspective may be optimistic, but what he perceived as a friend could be seen from a NT gaze as an acquaintance.

Rules of friendship

What makes friendship complicated, is that there is no formal agreement between friends, it is generally an unspoken bond. There are no rules, or lists of instructions which directly

state how one should behave towards a friend, these things can only be learnt through experience (Sigstad, 2017).

Reciprocity was seen as being one important rule, as Frank said without reciprocity “you’d just be a stalker!” If the relationship is too one sided, the participants generally saw the relationship as unbalanced, as ‘true’ friends must give as much as they get.

A second rule that emerged was that “people are not your possession, and they can have more than one friend”. Emma said this was something she had to learn as she was growing up, which caused her a lot of jealousy as a young child. Maybe this was to do with only having one friend, and not wanting to be replaced or forgotten about. Alternatively, if one party had many friends but the other party only has one, then the relationship may feel unbalanced.

A final rule emerged when Cainnech mentioned meeting people for the first time, and putting on a politer version of himself, then breaking them in slowly to his true personality. This is a form of masking which Cainnech has employed to hide his autism and avoid rejection, which Cainnech views as one of the rules of friendship.

2. MEANS TO AN AUTHENTIC SELF

The second overarching theme that was identified as important for the participants in their discussion and experiences of friendship was termed ‘Means to an Authentic Self’, and was largely about the importance of feeling understood as ‘you’ and not having to change to please others. The sub-themes that will be discussed within this theme are empathy, trust and authentic communication.

Trust

Extract 3:

“I do find it difficult to trust – I’ve learnt that generally it’s a mistake”

(Richard)

As discussed earlier, Richard saw trust to be a central criterion for a friendship. When asked about reading people Frank said, “I have no clue what their intent may be”, which must make it daunting to meet someone new and begin new relationships. The participants agreed that trust is a part of any close friendship and if it is broken, Emma suggested that they are automatically no longer a friend. She said someone abused her autistic traits by exploiting her honesty.

Since then, Emma explained that she has been unable to trust anyone, making it harder for her to form new friendships. If she does, it is likely that they will not be based on an authentic version of herself. Being able to express oneself in an unadulterated, authentic manner was seen by participants as of paramount importance to a good quality friendship. This is based on the need to be accepted and not judged or made to feel “wrong or bad”.

Krisali said friendship is having the ability to “freely share all aspects of myself”, being able to disclose any information without worry. Krisali’s best friend is her dog, an honest, authentic relationship, where trust is unlikely to be broken. Alternatively, Richard said there are things which he couldn’t disclose to anyone unless it was in a paid capacity. This indicates Richard is only able to trust professionals bound by confidentiality agreements. He said he felt in a true friendship there would be a much higher degree of trust than with an acquaintance. When talking with a professional, trust is guaranteed and Richard is not vulnerable. Richard is getting his need to open up to people fulfilled elsewhere, so he has no need for a friend who he cannot be his authentic self around. He cannot be hurt by a professional, and there are clear lines defining their relationship.

Frank said, “when people get too close, I tend to push them away”. If they are prying too much into his life or demand a certain level of trust or disclosure from him, he backs off. Friendships have always been very “surface” to him, and he never felt the need for anything deeper. It is possible that he didn’t feel the need to explore the depths of friendship, as he didn’t feel like he could trust them with the more personal, confidential parts of himself which would make him vulnerable. In a true friendship, this vulnerability should be reciprocated by the other party.

According to Cainnech, “once you gain the trust of somebody with autism, they’ll be a friend for life”. In general, the participants perspective of trust was that it lasts forever, and there is no reason for it to be broken. The more trust gets broken, the harder it will be for it to form in the future, leaving the individual more isolated.

Authentic Communication

Honesty was important to the participants in this study, especially Emma who said, “at least people know where they stand with me – I wish people would do the same for me”.

Cainnech admired his friend because he was “upfront and honest”, but explained that “when you’re too honest to people, they don’t like it”. Frank discussed going to the self-checkout at the supermarket even though there was a free till, when the cashier said to him “I’m free you know”, to which he wanted to say, “I don’t fucking care if you’re free, I don’t want to talk to you”.

Extract 4:

“Obviously, in the world we currently live in, everything’s based on needing to be able to talk and read and write and interact with other people”.

(Frank)

Frank shows anger about the way NTs behave which implies they think everyone is or should be NT. Frank’s body language was his form of authentic communication when he chose to use the self-checkout. He spoke about university being hard for him as he had to leave his comfort zone to initiate conversations, however Krisali found leaving her comfort zone useful as it encouraged her to try new things.

Krisali said friendship is “to be challenged compassionately and respectfully”, meaning friends should challenge and encourage each other. If two friends cannot be honest they will not learn from each other, something that both Richard and Cainnech mentioned as being important to them. They both said debating is important, as it helped them reflect on their “attitudes to life” and “think about the world in a different way”. Richard says he has

no friends, but speaks about one person who he enjoys debating with being the closest thing he has to a friend. Richard could be replacing friendship with debates as his needs are being fulfilled, alongside the conversations he has with professionals.

Debates are conversations with a purpose, and they are rational and logical, unlike chit chat, which Frank described as “people talking to me about random things”. These conversations are illogical and “ridiculous”, and didn’t make sense to the majority of the participants who seemed to have a strong hatred for it.

Frank explained having a “list of things that happened that day, which is the list of things worth talking about and that’s it”. Emma, who says she “goes in like a bull in a china shop” regularly offends non-autistic people through the way she says what she means.

Extract 5:

“Neurotypicals are snowflakes, they get offended over the slightest thing”
(Emma)

Emma eloquently describes her feelings about the situation, and went on to advise NTs pursuing friendship with autistic people to “toughen up, it’s a rough ride”.

Empathy

The participants identified support, which included being listened to and being understood as a reason for having friends. Moreover, many participants found it difficult to be around people who didn’t understand autism.

Extract 6:

“I could feel less like I have to censor myself and disguise my nature”
(Richard)

This is the opposite of Richards authentic self, as he describes directly changing and disguising his nature to fit in. He is not the only participant to say this, as Emma said that

around people who understand autism she doesn't "have to pretend to be anyone else", and that she doesn't have to explain herself. Furthermore, Krisali said friendship "is to be free of my multiple masks".

Emma, Richard, and Frank all felt comfortable around autistic people, as they know they are understood, and can be their authentic selves.

Extract 7:

"with other autistic people, we know what we're going through, and what our lives are like, we have an automatic bond there generally"

(Richard)

Although it may not be the same as the automatic bond between two autistic people, being friends with NTs that understood autism allowed many of the participants to feel comfortable enough to be their authentic selves and benefitted them in social situations.

Leon said he has a friend who is non-autistic, who he met through an online forum. He was out at the pub with this friend, when he started to feel flustered which his friend recognised, then asked Leon if he would like to leave.

Extract 8:

"Leaving the pub when I felt flustered made me feel reassured, and let me know they were definitely a good friend".

(Leon)

Leon said a good friend is "someone who can spot when I'm overloaded". He said if he is feeling like that, people should give him some space and just check that he is all right. Emma said she has friends who can spot the signs of her heading towards a meltdown and will reach out to her when they see these signs. However, everyone is different as Frank said when he feels overloaded he prefers to be left alone.

Extract 9:

“Someone who is kind, empathetic, a good listener, patient, and has a basic understanding of how being autistic affects me”.

(Leon)

Leon’s definition of a good friend is similar to Krisali’s, who said her ideal friend would be someone who is “actually bothered to find out what it is to live with ASD”. This implies she is happy to be asked about being autistic.

Leon said “listen, that’s a prerequisite of every friendship really”. One participant said NTs should “let us choose what makes us comfortable”. This friendship requirement is more than just being a shoulder to cry on, but allowing the person to have a say in choosing where the friends meet, what activities they want to do together, and making adjustments that allow them to be comfortable. If these things are accomplished, the autistic person will be comfortable enough to freely express themselves.

Extract 10:

“All of autistics would say, if it did make your bum look big, would go ‘yeah it does’, rather than ‘no, it doesn’t”

(Cainnech)

Here, Cainnech offers an example of freedom of expression, which is echoed by Emma who said “if someone looks fat in a dress, tell them they look fat! If not they will go and spend £50 on a dress that makes them look fat”. Emma and Cainnech both pride themselves on their honesty, however they said it does occasionally hurt people’s feelings. If people do not understand autism, they may see this as Emma being insensitive but when she explains it, she is being a good friend and trying to help.

3. FRIENDSHIP AS A DEPENDENCY

Because of the amount of times ‘offending’ people was mentioned alongside not wanting friends, the final overarching theme ‘Friendship as a Dependency’ emerged. The two sub-

themes that will be analysed are 'Better to be Alone' and a contradictory sub-theme of 'Good to be Reliant'. This theme illustrates the fraught nature of friendship which leads to considering whether friends are a help or a hindrance to the participants.

Better to be alone

Richard agreed that he sometimes offends people, even when trying to help them. He said he gave someone who he thought was a friend a piece of advice about their potential career choice, which upset them. Upon recollection, he stated:

Extract 11:

"Maybe there's no point of sharing my thoughts, the whole point of that conversation was that the person could reflect, purely friends talking, supposedly friends, well not anymore, so they could hopefully steer around pitfalls like that, like choosing the wrong line of work".

(Richard)

moreover, he said "the less involved I am with anyone the less my actions or reactions could impact them, it's safer this way, safer". Richard is suggesting he is better off alone, making it less likely that he could impact someone's life in a negative way.

Emma explained that she feels like she is hard work for her friends, and is confused as to "why they do it, like how can you just give like that without... reciprocation?" Emma is someone who "didn't like to feel dependent on anybody". She said when her trust was broken it pushed her too far the other way and led her to "subconsciously sabotage" her relationships with friends, cutting people off when they got too close. This is also echoed by Frank who also said when people got too close he pushed them away. They are both less likely to become a burden to somebody if they remain 'independent'.

Good to be reliant

Emma said without the five or six people that watch her back, she would likely be dead by now. Friends can assist with things that are difficult, such as Frank's friend, who he relied on to tell him when he had made a new friend. He mentioned seeing her receive support from her own friends and said;

Extract 12:

"For the first time, I saw through somebody else's eyes what proper friendship might look like, and it looked useful"

(Frank)

He admits that the word 'useful' is probably a rude way to describe it, but says NTs can "bring things that I can't, so that's helpful".

Leon describes that without his NT friends he wouldn't have had some of the most enjoyable experiences of his life. Richard admitted he would choose to be like people who get "validation of identity" from friendship, and that he imagines friendship to be "incredibly helpful in maintaining emotional and mental stability".

The ability to be challenged by friends and learn from them, is how friendship can validate one's identity, as Richard is someone who values debating with people because it brings him "insight into how we do things, and the choices we make". Richard is aware of the benefits of friendship and reliance on others, but takes pride in his independence and may be fearful of becoming a burden.

Extract 13:

"The more out of control we feel, the more we feel like we need to control a situation. The more we can control a situation, the more relaxed were gonna feel"

(Emma)

Finally, Emma sees a balance between these conflicting sub-theme ideas and explains that allowing the person to freely express themselves and feel listened to, maintains their

independence, as long as the fine line between taking someone's independence away and offering freedom of choice is not crossed.

DISCUSSION

The participants of this study have said they value friendship, and prefer it when it is a reciprocal and balanced relationship. They said they feel that the social rules of the world we currently live in are set up for NTs to thrive and need to change to become more accepting of neurodiversity. They said to realise their authentic self, they require other people to have an understanding of autism, and to be listened to and understood individually. They said this would allow them to authentically communicate with others and feel like they do not have to 'mask' or guard their personality, and speak freely without fear of judgement. The participants said trust, which could be thought of as 'reciprocal vulnerability', takes a long time to build due to negative past experiences. Finally, they said if they are going to be friends with someone, they prefer that their independence is supported, and not reduced by the friendship.

Theoretical implications

What can be learned from this research is that homophily is important to the formation of friendships (Utz and Jankowski, 2016), but it is not the only factor. For the participants, knowing they were "understood" by NTs seemed more important than homophily and contributed to the success or failure of the relationship. This confirms the value of listening directly to the voices of autistic people as the true "experts" (Kluth, 2003). Researchers who aim to raise awareness should do this by sharing the voices of autistic people and promoting the concept of neurodiversity, rather than through the remedial lens of the medical model (Milton & Sims, 2016).

This study has highlighted that notions of NT friendship are not the only way in which it can be experienced, and that friendship formation varies across different groups and situations (Brownlow, Bertilsdotter Rosqvist & O'Dell, 2013). New methods of contact such as social media can be very helpful for autistic people as they can have more control over the

“impression” they create (Brownlow, Bertilsdotter Rosqvist & O'Dell, 2013), and is where Leon met one of his best friends. Brownlow, Bertilsdotter Rosqvist & O'Dell (2013) suggested an alternative understanding of friendship, where a “range of possibilities” for being social and having friends is acknowledged and promoted.

Methodological implications

The study successfully explored the experiences of the participants, and produced vast amount of rich data. However, the study was not without its limitations. The researcher has a wealth of experience working with people with autism which meant they could quickly build a rapport with the participants, which may have influenced the participants answers. Moreover, the researcher holds a very inclusive ideology and believes neurodiversity should be accepted and celebrated, which could have had an impact on the interpretation of the data. If the research was conducted using questionnaires or a different data collection methodology, this may have produced an entirely different report, however that is the nature of thematic analysis.

Practical implications

A number of strategies and advice were identified by the participants. The participants advised interventionists to be aware of the fine line between supporting someone's independence and taking it away. They said offering choice and control will help them to feel comfortable, and preferred situations with purpose, such as activities or events so there is always something to talk about.

With regards to the understanding of autism, participants said they would be happy to explain it to someone who was willing to listen. The participants welcomed being told when they were talking too much or overstepping a mark, and valued honesty. This included using clear, non-abstract language, and setting boundaries such as agreeing to change the topic after five minutes. The participants pleaded with NTs not to be offended by what autistic people say, as they might be trying to be helpful or having trouble stopping themselves from saying something.

When developing new interventions for supporting autistic people with friendship, these strategies should be taken into consideration. What the participants identified as a concern was that NTs do not understand autism, so these simple ideas should be shared across the public domain in schools, universities and workplaces so that future generations of citizens and professionals may all have a better understanding of autism and neurodiversity.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1.

Participant Information Sheet

Project title: EXPLORING HOW PEOPLE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM EXPERIENCE FRIENDSHIP WITH 'NEUROTYPICALS'

Investigator: *Elliot Newton*

Project supervisor: *Dr. Bridgette Rickett*

Invitation to participate

If you identify as being on the Autistic Spectrum, you are being invited to take part in a research study about the subject of Friendship. Taking part is voluntary; it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. It is important for you to understand what the research is about and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. If anything is not clear to you or you would like more information please ask.

What is the project about?

- We are interested in what your idea of friendship is, how you think friendships are formed, and the things that make it easier or harder to make friends.
- We are also interested in whether or not you have any friends who don't have autism, and what it's like to make friends with or be friends with people who don't have autism.
- This research is a part of my dissertation project for my Psychology Masters degree, and the interviews will be analysed to see if we can find better ways of helping people to make friends.

- There is no pressure whatsoever for anyone to volunteer, so feel free to decline, and also remember that you can withdraw from the study at any time before 1st August 2018 as the deadline for the project is September 2018.

What will I be asked to do?

- If you volunteer, you will be invited to an interview where we can have a conversation about friendship. You can choose whether you would prefer to meet me in person, or have a video or telephone conversation.
- I would like to record the conversation to make sure I remember everything we talked about, as long as you are OK with this.
- If there are any questions you would prefer not to answer, that is fine too.
- The interview will last for around an hour, and can take place face to face, via skype or via a telephone interview, but I am happy for you to come and go if you need to. In addition, I'm happy for you to attend with a family member or an advocate.
- I will try to make the experience as positive and enjoyable as possible, so if there is anything you would like to request, I am open to making changes if it makes you more comfortable.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of taking part?

This study will help psychologists develop better ways of helping people make friends if they find it hard. Your expert knowledge of living with Autism will help us to understand the things that make it harder or easier for people in the future, so by taking part you will be indirectly helping people make friends.

If you find the conversation difficult and you would like to talk to someone afterwards, you can get in contact with the National Autistic Society who can provide free advice on: 0808 800 4104 or <http://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/main/contact.aspx>.

How will my information be used?

The information collected during this study will be used to produce my MSc dissertation. The people who might read this in an official capacity are my project supervisor, other members of the psychology staff and external examiners. Additionally, the information may be published in academic journals, presented at academic conferences, or used for teaching purposes. Although the information may be used for these purposes, you will not be identifiable in any way through these activities. You will have the opportunity at the beginning of the interview to choose a nickname or pseudonym to be referred to instead of your real name to make sure you remain anonymous.

The audio recordings will be destroyed as soon as I have typed them up onto my computer, which will be stored and backed up securely on a hard drive which is password protected.

Will my information be confidential?

All the information you provide will be treated in confidence. This means that your name will not be passed on to anyone else and your information will be used solely for the research or teaching purposes of the university. All of your information will be stored securely and only my project supervisor and I will have access to each person's individual information. The only time that my project supervisor or I would reveal anything to an appropriate authority would be if you divulge information that we feel could potentially put you or another person at risk of harm. This decision would only be taken following full consultation with my supervisor.

Can I change my mind?

Yes, you can stop taking part in the study at any time. You can also ask for part or all of your data to be destroyed. You can do this without any negative consequences and you do not need to provide a reason. If you would like to withdraw your data, please reach out to me by email, stating your chosen pseudonym/nickname no later than 1st August 2018. My email address can be found below.

Who can I contact for further information?

Researcher -

- *Feel free to contact myself, Elliot Newton – e.newton5922@student.leedsbeckett.ac.uk*
- *Or Dr Bridgette Rickett through email: b.rickett@leedsbeckett.ac.uk*
- *If you wish to talk to an independent representative within the university and someone who is outside of this research study, please contact Julie Heaton on j.heaton@leedsbeckett.ac.uk*

What happens next?

Please think carefully about whether or not you wish to take part in the study. If you do wish to take part, please complete the attached consent form.

Thank you for considering participating.

APPENDIX 2.

Consent Form

Project Title: EXPLORING HOW PEOPLE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM EXPERIENCE FRIENDSHIP WITH 'NEUROTYPICALS'

Investigator: *Elliot Newton*

Project Supervisor: *Dr Bridgette Rickett*

Please indicate your agreement by ticking the following boxes after each of the statements and sign where indicated below:

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and understand what is expected of me.

2. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary.

3. I understand that I am free to stop the study at any time and I am free to withdraw my data from the study until 1st August 2018.

4. I give my consent to being audio-taped during the interview.

5. I agree to the use of direct quotations providing that any quotations are anonymised.

6. I confirm that I have been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the study, and if asked, the questions were answered to my full satisfaction.

Data Protection Act

I understand that data collected from me during this study will be stored on computer and that any computer files containing information about me will be made anonymous. I also understand that this consent form will be stored separately from any data that I provide.

I agree to Leeds Beckett University recording and processing my data and that these data will be used for an MSc project, and may be presented in other academic forums (e.g., academic journals, at conferences, or in teaching). I understand that my data will be used only for these purposes and my consent is conditional upon the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act.

Your name (print)

Your signature

Date

Researcher's name (print)

Researcher's signature

Date

Thank you for this information. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

APPENDIX 3.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you explain what friendship is?
2. Do you think it's important for people to have friends?
3. How do you know that you're friends with someone?
4. Who do you like hanging out with most and why?
5. What's been your best friendship?
6. How did you meet that person?
7. Who would your ideal friend be?
8. Who is more difficult to hang around with and who is easy?
9. Have you ever found it difficult to make friends and why?
10. How would you want people to act towards you if you were in a bad mood?
11. What's it like being friends with neurotypicals?
12. Is there any advice you would give to neurotypicals about being friends with someone on the autistic spectrum?

APPENDIX 4.

Signed Ethical Approval

STAGE 2 - RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL FORM (September 2014)

FOR PROJECTS INVOLVING RISK CATEGORY 2 AND 3: DECLARATION AND SIGNATURE/S			
APPLICANT (STUDENT/STAFF MEMBER/RESEARCHER)			
<i>I confirm that I will undertake this project as detailed in stage one and stage two of the application. I understand that I must abide by the terms of this approval and that I may not make any substantial amendments to the project without further approval. I understand that research with human participants or their data must not commence without ethical approval.</i>			
I have read an appropriate professional or learned society code of ethical practice:		Yes x N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	
Where applicable, give the name of the professional or learned society:		BPS Ethics Guide	
Signed	Elliot Newton	Date	14/03/2018

RESEARCH SUPERVISOR/DIRECTOR OF STUDIES RECOMMENDATION FOR STUDENT PROJECTS					
<i>I confirm that I have read stage one and stage two of the application. The project is viable and the student has appropriate skills to undertake the project. Where applicable, the Participant Information Sheet and recruitment procedures for obtaining informed consent are appropriate and the ethical issues arising from the project have been addressed in the application. I understand that research with human participants must not commence without ethical approval. I recommend this project for approval.</i>					
Name	Bridgette Rickett	Signed	Bridgette Rickett	Date	03-02-18

Local Research Ethics Co-ordinators

Please complete EITHER A (giving ethical approval for the project) OR B (recommending the project to the Faculty Research Ethics Committee for approval)

A LOCAL RESEARCH ETHICS CO-ORDINATOR APPROVAL					
<i>For projects approved by the Local Research Ethics Co-ordinator</i>					
<i>I confirm ethical approval for this project</i>					
LREC Name	Andrew Wilson	Signed		Date	07.08.18

This form will be retained for the purposes of quality assurance of compliance and audit for THREE years

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REFLECTIVE REPORT

METHODOLOGICAL JOURNEY

The recruitment of participants, organisation and facilitation of the interviews was straightforward and enjoyable for the researcher. It was not until the transcriptions that the first challenge was encountered. It took a significant amount of time for the interview audio to be transcribed verbatim, far longer than the researcher had anticipated.

10,000 words of interview answers were analysed for overarching themes, which initially split the dataset into two; friendship and autism. These two groups of data were used to create two documents ready for phase two analysis. Once codes had been identified, the researcher organised them into groups, seeking meaning within each group. This was done for all the codes, making sure the autism and friendship data remained separate. After these were analysed for deeper meanings, the data could then be triangulated.

At this point the themes were “Benefits”, “Trust & Honesty”, “Experience” and “Being Understood”. These themes seemed broad at the time because the researcher struggled to distinguish between descriptive and conceptual meanings. It was not until meeting with the research supervisor that the themes became broader and more thematic, rather than literal, surface level analysis.

The researcher was aware that the analytic credibility of the work will depend on the coherence of the argument (Nowell et al., 2017). This meant it was imperative that the sub-themes were clearly defined and named so the analysis could be thorough. An attempt to write up the analysis proved unsuccessful, as the researcher was interpreting the large number of sub-themes to an equal degree of depth. Referring back to the thematic analysis literature, Nowell et al, (2017) advised the researcher should try and identify the themes most relevant to the phenomena being examined and explore these further. However, what was clear from the guidance that no data should be discarded, as it could all be useful even if it did not fit directly into a theme, but prioritisation needed to be stricter. Looking back, it was far too early to try and write up the analysis, as there were more phases of analysis to

conduct.

Upon inspection from the research supervisor, three wider overarching themes and sub-themes emerged:

Navigating friendship

- What is friendship
- Levels of friendship
- Rules of friendship

Means to an authentic self

- Empathy
- Trust
- Authentic communication

Friendship as a dependency

- Good to be reliant
- Better to be alone

These themes were much more meaningful and conceptual than the previous themes which were very descriptive, allowing the researcher to explore the deeper subtexts within the participants answers. The revised themes were triangulated with the existing analysis to find the relevant data which formed the basis of the final write up included in the journal article.

The process of writing up the argument was strenuous as there was a lot more data which could not be included. Many direct extracts were incorporated in the write up, which allowed the participants voices to be heard and analysed verbatim.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL JOURNEY

When writing up the analysis and discussion section, the researcher was aware that their perspective could become an influence on the data, and would have found it easy to go off

on long rants about how neurotypicals are the problem and so on, but had to remain analytical and psychological with their writing style.

There were many practical strategies within the data, which the researcher deemed as valuable resources for the psychological profession. However, not all of these could be incorporated into the final report as it had to remain concise and directly relevant to the topic of friendship. The researcher feels that this study has not concluded with the submission of this article, as there is much more data to discuss.

The researcher began the project with an open mind and an inclusive ideology, believing that neurodiversity should be celebrated and valued. Their understanding of friendship was that it was a fascinating and complex structure, that needed further explanation. Since conducting this research, they have questioned their understanding of friendship, and had to learn to step back and be objective about it. The idea that everyone *needs* and should have friends is very neurotypical. Some participants mentioned making sure that the individual *wants* friends. This is a person centred and inclusive idea which was in line with the researcher's values, but had somehow not previously occurred to them.

Richard said, "inclusivity is subversion of human nature", which was a shocking moment for the researcher. This interesting outlook felt dark and negative, but was Richard's opinion, which had to be respected. The researcher wanted to spend more time talking with Richard about this philosophy, but this would have taken the interview off track. Upon reflection, the researcher can now understand this perspective and has realised the value of considering all the possible arguments against any philosophy.

At times the researcher found themselves becoming too psychological and clinical with the language describing the participants and their ideas, but still wanted to respect the autistic experience. This is challenging when writing psychological literature as the researcher is new to the academic field, so finding the balance between an inclusive voice and an academic, analytical voice is something that had to be learned quickly, and hopefully shone through in the final article.

Overall, this project has had a positive impact on the researcher who has now completed their first psychological research project, feels energised to take this project further and may conduct more interviews with the autistic community.