

“DON’T BE IN YOUR OWN HEAD TOO MUCH”:

HOW AUTISTIC FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS BUILD ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

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An increasing number of *autistic students* attend U.S. universities, and *higher education* must meet their support needs. Existing literature frames research using a medical model of autism and is limited surrounding how autistic students form academic and social bonds during their *first-year transition*. This *qualitative* study examines 13 autistic students’ transition to the university and takes a strengths-based look at how they build *academic and social support*. I center autistic students’ *lived experiences* using a *disability studies* and *neurodivergent paradigm* conceptual framework and a grounded theory methodological approach. I collect and analyze data using *constructivist grounded theory* methods, including intensive interviews and iterative strategies. The result is a core process model of *Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting* that describes students’ experience of *stress during social situations* and the mediators to that process. I also describe how autistic first-year students build academic and social support and identify *support facilitators and barriers*. I recommend that administrators, staff, and faculty understand and study the effects of the core process of Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting as it can have far-reaching effects beyond any specific program or policy. I additionally recommend that universities consider specific adaptations to address the facilitators and barriers to support.

Keywords: autistic students, higher education, first-year transition, social support, academic support, disability studies, neurodivergent paradigm, constructivist grounded theory, Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting, double empathy problem

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I still have this thing where I feel like I'm not autistic enough. Like, I do want the support, because I do need the support for, like, autism. But, like, also I don't wanna deal with the stigma that comes from it. – Granola

As a neurodivergent college student, I remember working hard to avoid speaking with an advisor. My anxiety and ADHD may have factored into this decision. I made it to my senior year when I first met with an advisor to apply for graduation. I discovered I was a few credits short; luckily, I could get into the class I needed to finish on time. Instead of seeking support from advisors, I found support in less-typical ways. I read the printed course catalog and even found things on the internet at a time when few people even knew what it was. Decades later, as university faculty, I have had experiences with students that lead me to wonder: do autistic students seek out support in ways that are different from the typical? I want to understand how autistic students navigate support systems in college.

College administrators and faculty with inaccurate or incomplete conceptualizations of autism and autistic experience may fail to meet the educational needs of this student population. As facilitators of the higher education system, we must understand what it means to be autistic. Most higher education administrators and teachers have a conceptual understanding of autism created from our personal life experiences. We may have seen a television news special where an autistic teen communicates with her parents through a computer; where they once thought her unable to form sentences, they discover that Carly writes poetry (Goldberg & Putrino, 2009). We may have met autistic students in the classroom and noticed stereotypical behaviors, abilities, and preferences. As a staff member in higher education, we may have advised an autistic student who was not submitting assignments because they had not completed them perfectly. Hearing the

word autism, we each conjure a concept of autism that looks like these experiences. These conceptions may fail to capture the full complexity of what it means to be autistic and may constrain our understanding of autistic identity and experience.

Autistic teens transitioning to college and persisting to graduation may face challenges different from neurotypical students. Autistic students can also leverage strengths during that transition that neurotypical students cannot. Typical transition challenges can be a more difficult hurdle for autistic teenagers. At the same time, new social and educational environments can inspire autistic students to grow and expand their world in ways they find simple and engaging. Given that the number of autistic college students has grown over the last three decades, the need to better understand autistic student experiences in college also continues to increase (Barnhill, 2016). University administration, staff, and faculty must understand the support needs of autistic college students as they transition from high school to college to meet this growth (Nevison & Parker, 2020).

This study explores the experiences of first-year autistic college students as they form academic and social support networks. Data comes from intensive, semi-structured interviews that center the voices of autistic students. This study aims to generate a model of the processes that autistic students use in forming support networks that reflects the facilitators and barriers to experiences of meaningful support. Autistic students' descriptions of their lived experience during their first-year transition are collected and analyzed with constructivist grounded theory methods that "ground" broader, more abstract concepts or potential theories in the data collected. These methods include simultaneous data collection and analysis, focusing on processes and actions rather than themes, using constant comparative methods, and pursuing developing conceptual categories and models rather than applying an existing model or theory to the data

(Charmaz, 2014). Using constructivist grounded theory analysis methods is appropriate when attempting to uncover and understand social relationships and processes inductively. By listening to the voices of autistic college students, I hope to bridge gaps in understanding for non-autistic higher education professionals. I also want to provide valuable information to autistic students and support their agency as they navigate the structures and culture of the university.

In Chapter 1, I overview the study. I describe the study's background, context, problem, and research questions guiding my work. Next, I explain why this study is necessary by outlining the research's purpose and significance. I then describe the study, supply important definitions and abbreviations, and describe the research's boundaries and limitations.

The Importance of Language

How we talk about people matters to both individuals and society. Choice in language can affect how we perceive the world and even shape our thoughts about individuals and cultures (Wolff & Holmes, 2011). Words can be powerful tools for influence and impact; because of that power, they can also spark intense emotions. Even subtle changes in language choice can be meaningful. My use of language reflects how I speak about my disabilities and neurodivergence. When it is necessary to label myself, I prefer 'disabled person' over 'person with a disability.' The first is identity-first language (IFL), and the second is person-first language (PFL).

Since the 1980s, PFL has become a standard in professional settings (Ladau, 2021). It began with positive intentions as a movement to recognize the person before the disability. IFL pushes back against this movement. IFL recognizes that identity as disabled, autistic, or Deaf (for example) is not separate from the person.

Given the complexity of people and cultures, not everyone agrees on one right way to talk about disability, autism, and neurodivergence. Most within the autism community prefer to

be called autistic or an autistic person rather than ‘a person with autism’ (Ladau, 2021). IFL is a way to represent autism’s function within a person’s identity, and it deemphasizes autism as a disorder or diagnosis (Brown, n.d.). The 7th edition of the APA Publication Manual allows adjectival labels if that is what the community uses (American Psychological Association, 2020). The most recent update of The National Center on Disability and Journalism’s (2021) disability language style guide notes that opinions vary within the autism community on this topic but that the ideal is to use the individual's language preference when possible. Selecting a single approach for consistency and clarity when discussing groups at a macro level is essential.

For this study, I use IFL, which is what my close contacts within the community prefer. IFL includes using the terms autistic(s), autistic person/student, neurodivergent, or non-neurotypical to describe individuals who identify as such. Referring to those without autism, I use the terms non-autistic, neurotypical, or allistic. Additionally, unless a cited source or participant uses the term, I do not use the terms ‘Asperger’s/Asperger’s Syndrome’ or ‘High Functioning.’ Reference to Hans Asperger, who initially identified what was formerly known as Asperger’s Syndrome, is no longer necessary and evokes reminders of his ties to Nazi eugenics (Czech, 2018). However, many college-age students may have been initially diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome and may choose to self-identify that way. I also refrain from using functioning labels as they dismiss people’s abilities and support needs. Doctors, insurers, and schools may deny support to autistic people with a ‘high-functioning’ label even when they have support needs. A ‘low-functioning’ label may cause society to ignore an autistic individual’s strengths (The National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2021). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a diagnosis reflects that impairments can range across a spectrum where some people

have higher support needs than others (Lord et al., 2018). During the study, I consistently reflect study participants' preferences.

Autistic Students and the Higher Education Transition

Research on autistic postsecondary students in the university environment is still limited despite a growing body of work in the last five years (Davis et al., 2021). Within the population, 2.2% of adults are formally diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Of autistic adults, only 34.7% have attended college (Shattuck et al., 2012), while approximately 75% of the non-autistic population attends college (Roux et al., 2015). An increasing number of autistic students are attending college, but still at lower rates than their neurotypical peers (Accardo et al., 2019). The statistics indicate that this growth will continue; however, higher education may not be prepared to support the needs of autistic students (Kuder & Accardo, 2018).

Autistic college students are often academically prepared for higher education. Additionally, autistic neurological differences may support unique strengths; however, the experiences of autistic students indicate that challenges faced in the higher education environment may be impacting their ability to be successful and thrive (Anderson et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2018; Hillier et al., 2018; Nuske et al., 2019). While experiences vary, autistic students report “feelings of isolation, nervousness, sadness, struggles with peers, bullying, and being ostracized” (Davis et al., 2021, p. 2). Of autistic college students, fewer than 20% graduate or are on track to graduate after five years (Roux et al., 2015). After accounting for the wide range of abilities of those on the autism spectrum, many capable autistic students are not achieving a college education.

Given the gap in achievement for autistic college students, higher education institutions face an obligation to supply better support to students. The number of support programs on college campuses is still small, with approximately 1% or fewer postsecondary institutions having specialized programming (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Thierfeld Brown, n.d.; U.S. Department of Education, 2004-2019). While required to provide support and accommodations for autistic students by law under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, university disability services offices do not offer the range or type of services autistic students need (Kuder & Accardo, 2018). Literature discussing persistence and retention from the perspective of neurotypical students exists, but the literature on persistence and retention specific to autistic students is much more limited. A review of the literature shows deficiencies in two distinct areas. First, there is a lack of knowledge about the interventions that neurodivergent students find effective, limiting the development of evidence-based practice. Second, the research rarely addresses social and academic support as a comprehensive and cohesive support network. Filling this gap in the literature and practice forms the foundation for my research.

Based on existing research on higher education transition, retention, and persistence, a program supporting the creation of academic and social support networks would be most effective if it increases student integration, involvement, and engagement (Astin, 1999; Kuh et al., 2007; Tinto, 1975). Overwhelmingly, research shows that “what students do during college generally matters more to what they learn and whether they persist to graduation than who they are or even where they go to college” (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 410). Two of the most prominent approaches to understanding student persistence are Tinto’s model of student departure, which focuses on integration, and Astin’s theory of involvement (Milem & Berger,

1997, p. 387). Both Tinto and Astin name student involvement as being critical to student persistence, with Astin arguing that involvement is behavioral rather than simply a perception of inclusion or integration. Kuh (2003) argues that “Identifying who isn’t engaged and getting them involved is of primary importance” (p. 27). Given the importance of involvement, integration, and engagement in increasing persistence and retention, they have become the primary ways institutions approach programming to support students as they create academic and social support networks (Zander et al., 2018). However, this focus on involvement, integration, and engagement only considers the broader population of university students who are majority neurotypical. Approaches based on these models may be ineffective when applied to autistic students as they rely heavily on interaction and engagement (Cox et al., 2020). A central diagnostic criterion for autism spectrum disorder is “Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 50). While the community can debate the effectiveness of this diagnostic marker and its application to autism, the embodied reality is that autistic students may experience academic transition uniquely, and autistic students may have different support needs. To understand what may improve transition, retention, and persistence for autistic students and how higher education institutions might develop effective support programs based on that understanding, a model of how autistic students experience support during their academic transition may be valuable.

Gaps in Our Understanding

Existing literature surrounding the effect of academic and social bonds on student persistence and retention does not account for the specific experiences of autistic students (Astin, 1999; Cox et al., 2020; Kuh et al., 2007; Tinto, 1975). There is also a lack of literature evaluating academic and social support networks as an integrated whole (Thompson, 2008; Wilcox et al.,

2005). This constructivist grounded theory study looks to fill this knowledge gap. I want to explain to a neurotypical audience the process by which autistic first-year students create academic and social support networks. I also want to know the facilitators and barriers to autistic students' experiences of support during their first-year transition.

Their Words, Their Strengths

This qualitative research study seeks to explain to a neurotypical audience how autistic students create and experience academic and social support networks during their first-year transition. More importantly, my purpose in undertaking this study is to understand autistic students' first-year transition to college through their voices and to take a strengths-based look at how autistic students use social and academic support networks to navigate this experience. This study does not examine the entirety of a student's social network or the content of the academic support processes and programs offered by any single university.

I feel strongly that a research design based in constructivist grounded theory methods best suits this study. Researchers use constructivist grounded theory to perform inductive analysis to investigate and understand a social process where no prior theoretical models exist or they do not exist within a given context or for a particular population (Charmaz, 2014). Using a conceptual framework founded in disability studies and the neurodiversity paradigm, I explore ways autistic students leverage their strengths to create these networks during their transition into the unfamiliar environment of the university. This conceptual framework guides the choice to center autistic students' lived experiences. It also influences the research questions' strengths-based focus and underlies the selection of constructivist grounded theory methods for data collection and analysis.

Constructivist grounded theory methods inform my strategies for collecting and analyzing data in this study (Charmaz, 2014). The study takes place in the 2022-2023 academic year and recruits autistic first-year college students in the United States through purposive and theoretical sampling. I collect data about students' experiences through intensive interviews using Charmaz's (2014) interviewing framework modified as needed for autistic participants. From each interview, I develop provisional conceptual categories that allow me to adjust my interview approach and questions for future interviews. I adjust my interview guide to target these emergent conceptual categories to learn more about them. The later interviews also serve as member-checking, where I involve participants in reviewing my initial analysis. Data is analyzed systematically using constant comparative coding, researcher memoing, and theoretical saturation of themes and codes to develop a model or theory (Charmaz, 2014). In this method, data collection, researcher memoing, and analysis occur in cycles.

Using constructivist grounded theory methods of analysis and the lens of my conceptual framework allows me to explore and understand the diversity of autistic students' experiences without needing to compare them against neurotypical models or frames. The purpose is not to simply understand how autistic students are different from the typical, as this would be an ableist and potentially colonizing perspective. A model of the processes that autistic first-year students use to create academic and social support networks grounded in the lived experiences of autistic students can explain how autistic students naturally seek support and form support networks. The grounded theory generated might inform how universities can systemically change for the better to support the needs of autistic students across all academic and social support dimensions.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How do autistic first-year students experience and manage the development, growth, and maintenance of academic and social support networks?
2. What are the facilitators and barriers to autistic first-year students' experience of effective and meaningful support?

Why this Study?

The bulk of our understanding of the impact of improving educational support for autistic students comes from the K-12 environment. This research shows that autistic K-12 students are four times more likely than their neurotypical peers to need increased academic and social support services (Mandell et al., 2005). The work of Hume et al. (2021) is in its third iteration as it works to identify evidence-based intervention practices that have efficacy with autistic children and teens. Their work has found several practices for this age group that have positive outcomes in “behavioral, developmental, academic, vocational, or mental health” (Hume et al., 2021, p. 5). The indicators are that evidence-based improvements in support services have positive outcomes for autistic students in this younger population. Research with an older, first-year student population can explore whether these effects are similar. Additionally, a greater understanding of autistic students may affect how universities choose to supply support. Educators and administrators may be able to create evidence-based techniques to enhance and reinforce autistic students' naturally occurring support networks. This study benefits faculty, staff, and higher education administrators, but the primary impact should remain with autistic students.

Educational researchers have often failed to create direct impacts within the autism community because they overgeneralize, ignore uneven power dynamics, and are not mindful of ableism and ableist comparisons (Broido, 2021). Those in the autism community often quote Dr. Stephen Shores' saying: “If you have met one person with autism, you have met one person who

has autism” (Lime Network, 2018). The saying reminds us that broad generalizations about autistic people can lead to ineffective stereotypes and policies. Past research on autistic populations has relied on generalizations about autistic socialization and interaction that render it ineffective (MacKenzie, 2018). Beyond tendencies to overgeneralize, research in the autism community can serve to reinforce and reproduce uneven power structures where autistic people often find a lack of agency. Research efforts must be mindful of ableism as it is “deeply and subliminally embedded within the culture” (Campbell, 2008, p. 153). Research that uses neurotypical standards as the yardstick against which society compares autistic students is commonplace and reflective of this ableism. My research must address these concerns to have a beneficial impact for autistic students.

Unfortunately, most studies with autistic students in higher education do not center on the lived experience of the student. As Gelbar et al. (2014) found in a literature review, only 20 articles meeting their inclusion criteria evaluated the experiences of autistic students in higher education, and 90% were single-student case studies (p. 2595). Cox et al. (2017) find critical deficiencies in the empirical literature that make creating evidence-based interventions challenging. In addition, “researchers have collectively failed to validate these observations with the lived experiences of students with ASD” (Cox et al., 2017, p. 73). It is crucial to listen to a broad spectrum of autistic voices and perspectives, and engaging in an interactive dialogue to understand autistic students’ lived experience can inform how universities might change to support the needs of autistic students across all academic and social support dimensions,

The lack of research on support interventions for autistic students, particularly research that reflects the broad range of lived experiences of autistic students, is not the only gap in the extant literature. Literature evaluating academic and social support networks as autistic students

experience them is also lacking. Many studies discuss challenges for autistic students, but few identify successful support practices (Cox et al., 2020). These projects “typically focus on academic experiences and frequently present their discussions of success alongside equally extensive discussions of student challenges” (p. 2). Some research discusses social support, but given the lack of research in this area, academic and social support are not well-studied. A grounded theory study by Thompson (2008) on academic support and qualitative interviews done by Wilcox et al. (2005) evaluating social support are applicable; however, a combined theory of academic and social support networks may better represent the complexity of and interaction between these types of support.

Research centered on autistic students may help higher education administrators understand effective academic and social support practices and potentially inform interventions. However, this work can also support autistic students in identifying areas of strength and add to students’ sense of identity. Studies have shown that autistic students feel pressure to fit in with society and can face anxiety and pressure to normalize their behavior while being “restricted from opportunities to freely negotiate their self-identity” (Baines, 2012, p. 549; Kelly, 2005; Schneid & Raz, 2020). Baines (2012) examined how autistic students navigate and position “within their social worlds to belong, compete, participate, or distance themselves from their disability storyline” (p. 549). Contrary to the belief that those with autism detach from social life and social positioning, autistic students often work hard to adjust themselves to fit neurotypical social norms. Because of this, autistic students’ relationships with their identity as autistic are complex and fluctuating. Autistic adults often expend effort to control their social perception: to ‘pass,’ ‘normalize,’ and separate from stereotypes of autism (Baines, 2012). By amplifying

autistic student voices and knowledge, this research can contribute to students' understanding of their strengths and personal autistic identity.

Autistic students face uneven power dynamics in college stemming from the promotion of ableism and the subjugation of disability (Campbell, 2008). The disabled are neither survivors of affliction nor marginalized exiles but rather resisters against the system's oppression that labels them as autistic (p. 160). Autistic students cannot leverage power within the higher education environment until universities fully respect the range of experience on the entire autism spectrum as well as the whole, complex autistic person. Correcting this power imbalance requires that autistic people collaborate in the research process. Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al. (2019) set a relevant framework for emancipatory autism research emphasizing reflexivity, collaboration, and accessibility. By using an inclusive approach, where possible, given the confines of the dissertation research process, this study aims to influence the relationships and connections between autistic and non-autistic people and impact future research and practice. In applying a conceptual analytical frame based in disability studies and the neurodiversity paradigm to this study, I want to use these analytical tools to uncover exclusionary forces within existing practice (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012).

I intend to respect autistic students' knowledge, identity, and experience in the research process. By ensuring that the voices of autistic students are the primary focus, this study may provide insights that can affect the quality of education for autistic students, their ability to persist, and the institution's ability to retain students to graduation.

Positionality and Reflexivity

I am a part of this study and cannot entirely disconnect from my lived experiences, perspectives, and biases. Understanding the researcher's position and the effect that position may have on the interpretation of data is essential to the research process.

I have a family, educational, and employment history with higher education. My grandfather was a college professor, and my parents graduated from college. As a university student and teaching assistant professor, I have spent many years in higher education environments. My current work is with a program that serves first-year students identified as “at-risk” and students on academic probation. Disabled students are often disproportionately represented in my classes. I am committed to serving all students who want academic and personal support on their educational journey, but I am particularly interested in the needs of students with disabilities. My desire to understand the experiences, strengths, and needs of autistic students as they seek higher education opportunities drives my research interests. This interest stems from my work in higher education and individual experiences with disability and autism.

My perspective aligns with disability studies scholars and activists who believe it is not a person's impairment that creates disability but societal structures and norms. (Goodley, 2001, 2016; Shakespeare, 2005). Society and social structures disable people with impairments, and as a researcher and educator, I must challenge and change those structures. I struggle with using the term disability as it may question the abilities of those with an impairment or diagnosed medical condition. However, disability is not a ‘dirty’ word. I identify as disabled. I have both physical impairment and am neurodivergent with an ADHD diagnosis. I have experienced the effects of ableism as a barrier to educational access.

Additionally, my child is autistic, and I have spent time in the autism community as a parent and advocate since 2003. Now in college, I watched as my daughter and her friends navigated their first-year transition. As someone who is not autistic but is neurodivergent, I want to advocate for our needs in a world that has marginalized our voices. My experiences as a parent and a disabled person define and shape my perspectives on how disability affects educational access.

While I have a disability, my experiences color my perceptions in ways that are unique to me. Every disability is different, just as each person's life experience as someone with a disability is different. My subjective experiences bias my thinking, and I must work to ensure that my history does not limit my understanding of the lived experiences of others.

I believe in the positive effects that higher education can have for all students. I have spent many years working to achieve greater access and equity for students so that they might persist to graduation. I want to use my experience with students, autistic people, and as a neurodivergent learner to help build relationships with my study participants. This connection may help create trust so I can have full and meaningful conversations. I want participants to know that their agency and lived experiences are my priority.

Definition of Terms

Autism. A human neurological variant based on genetics that, while not fully understood, is distinguished by “high levels of synaptic connectivity and responsiveness” (Walker, 2021, p. 81).

Academic and Social Support Networks. Social systems that provide aid and protection to an individual through various support types, including emotional, instrumental, informational, self-appraisal, academic, metacognitive, and environmental support (Langford et al., 1997).

Academic Support. Support and interventions designed to address students' academic challenges (Lipka et al., 2019, p. 3).

Academic Transition. A stage of development where a student moves from one level of academic challenge to the next, including the transition between high school academics and university or college academics (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Double Empathy Problem. The disconnect in understanding between two communicating social actors whose perceptions of the world fundamentally differ. While both people experience this disconnect, the autistic person sees it as a common experience, and neurotypicals view it as unusual or weird (Milton, 2012).

Neurodivergent. Someone who “[has] a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of ‘normal’” (Walker, 2014), including those labeled with Autism Spectrum Disorders, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Tourette’s, and mental illnesses such as depression (Griffin & Pollak, 2009).

Neurodiversity. The wide range of human neurology and neurological difference expressed in individuals (Robison, 2017).

Neurotypical. The preferred term within the neurodiversity movement for those whose brain function “falls within the dominant societal standards of ‘normal’” (Walker, 2014).

Social Support. Broadly it is the “assistance and protection given to others” (Langford et al., 1997, p. 95).

Abbreviations Used

ASD. Autism Spectrum Disorder.

CDC. United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

DSM-5. The fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

IFL. Identity-first language.

NT. Neurotypical.

PFL. Person-first language.

Boundaries

I include autistic students who communicate through speech or computer in the English language, and I collect data directly from participants rather than through someone who interprets for them. Students' identification as autistic or their diagnosis is self-reported, and I choose not to request access to medical professionals' health records or clinical diagnoses. Where possible, I practice participatory and emancipatory research approaches to support participant agency and expertise. Extensive involvement with the research subjects is necessary for this study. My experiences within the autism community and familiarity with the subjects are important to how I view and interpret the data.

This study uses a constructivist grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis. I conduct interviews using telecommunications software with a purposive sample of students. Students are included in the study using the following criteria: (1) students who are previously diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as the DSM-5 defines it (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) or who identify as autistic; (2) full-time students taking at least 12 credit hours of classes; (3) students attending classes primarily in person on campus; (4) students who did not attend one or more different colleges or universities in the three semesters prior to the interview (excluding high school dual enrollment programs) and who have earned fewer than 12 transferable credits post-high school before starting at their current university; (5) students

who are over 18. In all cases, identification is self-reported and not confirmed with health or educational records. From this purposive sample, I use theoretical sampling to select those students who have the potential to help form the best model or theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Summary and Roadmap

Understanding how autistic college students create and experience academic and social support networks during their first-year transition may lead to better intervention and support. Chapter 1 introduced the study with its background, purpose, and significance. I also defined the scope of the study through the research questions and the study's limitations and delimitations.

This study comprises five chapters. Chapter One is the introduction, which includes the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, operational definitions, limitations and delimitations, and the significance of the study. Chapter Two is the literature review, which discusses the literature in the area of study. This review discusses the context of autism on college campuses, persistence and retention for autistic first-year students, autistic students' first-year transition support needs, and how autistic students form cohesive support networks. Chapter Three restates the problem and outlines the research methodology, design, population and sample, instrumentation, and data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter Four reports the study's findings. Chapter Five contains a discussion of the results and recommendations for further study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

I genuinely just think that further understanding in society at large of neurodivergent people and the way that our brains may work differently from, you know, the norm. I think that would be amazing for everyone. Like, just teach people how autistic people actually interact and don't treat us as a hush, hush secret. Like disability and neurodivergence, those aren't bad words. – Sirius

Through this qualitative study, I document autistic students' processes to form academic and social support systems during their transition into college. I developed my research questions from existing research on autism, academic support networks, and academic transition in higher education. I see where topics overlap within these three broad research areas, but a gap in our understanding exists at the intersection. Research exploring autism in higher education is recent, but the literature is growing. There is limited research on autistic college students' academic and social support networks; however, it does not address how academic and social supports work together to form a cohesive network. Finally, work on academic transition is a much larger area of research founded in the work of Tinto (1975, 1993) and expanded upon for over 40 years. Two of these three significant themes overlap and produce research in some of the literature; for example, the academic transition of autistic students (Adreon & Durocher, 2007) or the function of social support networks in postsecondary students with ASD (Ncube et al., 2019). Despite these overlaps, we see little research at the intersection between these three major themes. There is a distinct lack of clarity about how autistic college students manage the initial development, growth, and maintenance of academic and social support networks during their first year. We need complete information about the processes contributing to and interfering with effective and meaningful support.

Additionally, most research that explores how autism intersects with academic support networks, social support networks, or academic transition tends to ignore the lived experiences of autistic students in favor of centering on parents, administrators, support staff, and the university institutional structure. Existing research exploring the intersections between these themes suggests that neurotypical administrators, faculty, and staff may not understand how autistic students experience, compose, and form academic and social support networks during their academic transition. It follows that higher education would benefit from elevating the voices of autistic students to create this understanding.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the conflicting definitions and meanings of autism and what that conflict means within the context of higher education research. Next, I introduce the study's disability studies and neurodiversity paradigm conceptual framework. Disability studies views disability not as a functional limitation or impairment but as a socially constructed system (Goodley, 2001, 2016; Shakespeare, 2005). According to Hall (2019), we can only dismantle this system through work that centers disabled humans. The neurodiversity paradigm asserts that neurodiversity is valuable (Dwyer, 2018). This section of the literature review will create the lens through which we can view the literature on academic and social support networks and academic transition as separate themes and as they relate to autistic students in the higher education context. Next, I look more closely at our current understanding of academic and social support networks and first-year transition, particularly regarding autistic students. The chapter ends with a concluding summary and argument for how this study fills a knowledge gap and elevates the voices of autistic students on a topic where they have historically been absent or silenced.

Autism: A Diagnosis and an Identity

There has been a semantic shift in the term autism since doctors used it to describe socially withdrawn patients with schizophrenia in the early 1900s (Evans, 2013). As the prevalence of autism diagnosis has grown over the last three decades, we see a fundamental clash between the two mainstream models of autism: autism as a medical condition versus autism as a neurological difference (Nevison & Parker, 2020). The medical model has Functionalist underpinnings, while the approach that views autism as a difference comes from an Interpretivist lens. While there have been historical shifts in the usage, these two views continue to dominate the literature. This strict binary continues despite rising criticism from autistic people, allies, and some in the research community. How we use the terms autism and autistic directly impacts our culture and research. Accepted usage can affect the relationships and connections between autistic and non-autistic people and impact how we conduct educational research. Particularly, how researchers in higher education view autism and autistic students directly affects the structure of research and its outcomes. Brown et al. (2019) note that how higher education researchers view disability directly shapes their research. It “is important because some frameworks have unfavorable implications for college students with disabilities, at worst, and can empower disabled college students, at best” (Brown et al., 2019, p.20). In this study, I look at autism and autistic students in the higher education context. However, it is vital first to understand the broader historical and social context of autism and the autistic experience.

Medical Diagnosis: Historical Context for the Autism Label

Examining the historical usage of the term autism is important for understanding the context for our current conceptions of autism as a medical diagnosis and neurotype. Usage of the term began in Germany in 1911 (Evans, 2013). Eugene Bleuler was a psychiatrist and a devotee

of Freud. He used the term to describe a form of schizophrenia where the afflicted person was socially withdrawn. In Bleuler's definition, autism demonstrated a lack of connection to reality, "thinking that...was the source of both delusion and 'crude offenses against logic and propriety'" (Evans, 2013, p. 6). Bleuler's diagnostic definition highlighted the patient's lack of connection to society. Modern historical accounts typically ignore this history and start with Kanner in 1943 (Evans, 2013). Rather than viewing autism as a thought process or symbolic life that was not accessible to society, Kanner described the behavior of autistic children. With Kanner, autism became a diagnosis with detailed symptomology and sets of observed behavior. Autistic was used to "convey the fact that the children appeared not to be engaged with their external environment" (Evans, 2013, p. 10). While Kanner worked in the 1940s, his definition of autism would not take hold and expand until the 1960s.

Lotter used Kanner's behavioral definition in 1966 to compile some of the first autism prevalence data (Evans, 2013). Lotter's definition of autism as a function of behavior outside social norms sets a medical and academic research standard. Lotter's work established a standard approach to autism research where the researcher looks at autistic behavior as a deviation from the societal norm. In this conception, autism is a pathology or disease that needs correction or cure.

In the 1970s, doctors and researchers continued to define autism as a disorder firmly set within the medical model. Research progressed, and new theories describing the causes of autistic 'deviation' were developed by Rutter and others (Evans, 2013). In this period, the medical community no longer views autism as a behavior disorder; instead, autism becomes a communication disorder. The research shifted to examining autism as a product of child development. In the 1970s, we see the concept of schizophrenia and hallucination detach from

the meaning of autism completely. Kanner's *Journal of Autism and Childhood Schizophrenia* was renamed the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* in 1975.

In the 1980s, social and neurological layers are added to the definition of autism. With increased research and understanding using this medical model of autism, we have a growing interest in how autistic people and autism as a disorder function within the social world (Evans, 2013). Our modern understanding of autism as a spectrum develops from Wing and Gould's research. This definition saw autism as a defect of "social behavior and management" (Evans, 2013, p. 23). The definition of autism is slowly adding layers as it transitions from one that only highlights behavior and communication differences to one where we understand the social differences that may be occurring.

In the 1990s, Baron-Cohen's (1991) research popularized the view that autistic people cannot understand what is going on in the inner lives of others, ushering in a cognitively-based view of autism. Baron-Cohen's 'theory of mind' conceptualization of autism is still prevalent in the medicalized model of autism today. Baron-Cohen based his research on the theory that autistic individuals cannot understand other people's mental states and thoughts, which causes social impairment (Frith & Happé, 1994). This model complements other deficit models centered on behavior and communication differences. However, Baron-Cohen's research partner notes, "The hijacking of autism by those primarily interested in normal development has added greatly to the intellectual richness of autism research" (Frith & Happé, 1994, p. 118). Frith and Happé (1994) noted at the time that the theory of mind conceptualization of autism did not account for the full complexity of the autistic experience, particularly the strengths of the autistic brain.

Most recently, psychologists redefined autism in 2013 with the revision of the official tool for diagnosis, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This definition of autism sits squarely in the medical model and sees autism as a deficit. For a doctor to diagnose a person with autism, they must see deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Patients must also show two of four types of restricted, repetitive behaviors. In this modern medicalized conception of autism, we can see the historical underpinnings of autism as a behavioral, communication, and social disorder or deficit. Much of this early definitional work took place in the field of psychology; however, research using this medical model continues to expand in the areas of genetics, neuroscience, biology, and pharmacology (Damiano et al., 2014).

This brief history of the term's usage within the scientific community only hints at the social transformations the term has made over time. However, before we can explore these sociological transformations, we must understand the importance of language, labels, and their use in the context of autistic identity.

Conceptualizing the Autism Label

How we understand and use language is critical. The connection between the signifier (the written and spoken words we use) and the signified (the subject or content) is one that de Saussure (1906-1911/2017) examined extensively. Arguing that the sign is arbitrary, but the shared meaning and context of a word carries its value, a semiotic approach would assert that both definition and usage indicate the underlying meaning of the word. The impacts of definitions and usage can be seen in those who work with autistic people and within the identity of the autistic person, having clear implications for educational research and sociological understanding.

In an educational or care setting, a diagnostic label such as autism impacts the relationship between the autistic and the non-autistic. Gifford and Knott (2016) demonstrated the impact of a diagnostic label of autism on the “emotional responses and causal attributions made by care staff about challenging behavior” (p. 6). The label caused care staff to attribute behavior to biomedical causes and to have more positive emotional reactions to “challenging” behavior from autistic persons in their care. Gifford and Knott’s (2016) work is just one example of how an autism label might affect the social interactions between those on the spectrum and non-autistic individuals.

For autistic people, the label also has importance as a part of their self-conception and identity. Autistic people diagnosed or otherwise labeled as autistic must manage that label as a part of their identity (Baines, 2012, p. 549). A need to fit in with society may cause pressure to normalize behavior and restrict expressions of that identity. This complex relationship between an autistic person and their autistic identity in a primarily non-autistic world can cause identity fluctuation and confusion. Autistic people may alter or hide their true self as a way to ‘pass’ in non-autistic society, causing separation from their autistic identity (Baines, 2012). How the label of autism is derived, applied, and internalized significantly impacts the person receiving the label. Therefore, autistic people’s perspectives on how the term is defined and used are necessary for a complete understanding.

The need for a more consistent and accepted definition has become evident with the change in usage and the different stakeholders influencing these changes. Without a definition, educational research in the field will have issues with generalizability. Verhoeff (2012) argues that researchers see autism as a “natural kind” despite a wide range of presentations (p. 411). These natural kinds are essential in research as they are “related with the search for mechanistic

explanations and allow for inductive generalizations” (Verhoeff, 2012, p. 411). Being able to find the essential elements of autism as an observable thing, to understand what exactly is being signified by the category label of autism, is something that biological scientists have yet to uncover. However, it may not be possible to have a natural kind definition of autism. Instead, we may need to look away from the diagnostic and natural kind definitions into the sociological uses of the term.

Two Terminology Approaches: Condition vs. Difference

The two main approaches to using the term autism reflect underlying social conceptualizations and frameworks: autism as a condition vs. autism as a difference. While the concept of autism as a difference is a newer perspective that developed from the original diagnostic definition, both schools of thought remain.

The view of autism as a condition reflects the medicalized and diagnostic history of autism from the work of Bleuler to the current use of the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Evans, 2013). This view of autism as a pathology and disorder that society must correct results from the medical model of autism. We often see terms such as disorder, pathology, diagnosis, and cure within this usage. Fitting in with Durkheim’s (1912/2017) views on deviant behavior, this usage indicates a societal need for autistic individuals to function within accepted boundaries of behavior as it labels their autism as a deviation from that social norm. While this conception of autism as a condition has limitations, autistic people still have a functional need for the medicalized view of autism.

Autistic people operating within society need the medicalized conception of autism. Liu et al. (2010) evaluated the social impact of diagnosis. They note that to get resources for their children, “parents have to recognize the behavioral symptoms of autism, identify and reach a

physician capable of identifying autism, and learn how to navigate the complex world of state developmental service departments, school systems, and other service vendors” (Liu et al., 2010, p. 1). In this way, the functional, medical definition of autism is valuable and necessary. Having the definition allows parents to communicate with social systems that can provide services. Autistic college students often need official diagnoses to receive services from university disability services programs. However, it is interesting to see how scientific research focuses on this medicalized view as it may fail to capture the fundamental nature of autism and autistic identity.

While diagnosis is a complicated social process involving stigma and labeling theory, the underlying sociological process pathologizes the autistic individual. The primary focus is diagnosis and treatment or cure. Russell and Norwich (2012) observed that parents adopted different positions relative to obtaining an autism diagnosis for their children. However, these positions ultimately centered around normalizing their children or normalizing autism to reduce stigma. The focus was on gaining or accepting a diagnosis, and social forces were noted relative to the normalization of the diagnosis within society. When we use autism as a diagnosis to categorize, pathologize, and create normalizing processes and treatments, we primarily serve the needs of doctors, scientists, parents, and society over the needs of the autistic individual.

Before society had a word for autism, autistic people existed. We may have called them eccentric or categorized them with differing disability labels. As a term, autism was created for practical use, to pathologize for treatment. Given the initial purpose of the term, having a diagnostic conceptualization of the term as your first understanding makes sense. Typically, our first exposure to the specifics of autism comes through a medical or diagnostic source. My daughter’s diagnosis gave me a more detailed understanding of autism. My first learning was

from a medical view, just as society's first understanding of autism came from a medical model. However, the medical model directly contrasts with a more modern view where autism is conceptualized as a neurological difference rather than a disorder.

The second predominant usage of the term centers on the 'othering' of autism—seeing autism as a difference from the norm rather than pathology or deviance. In this usage, we see the conceptualization of autism through terms such as neurodivergent, integration, and tolerance. Rather than seeing autistic individuals as a problem to be corrected, this usage is centered on the positive differences in autistic identity and the separation between the social location of autistic and non-autistic people.

In looking at the 'autism as difference' approach, we see an attempt to acknowledge the social impacts of the diagnostic label and account for them by emphasizing the positive aspects and traits of autism. In this construct, autism is still a separating force but a more equal one. As Brownlow (2010) argues, "A renegotiation of this construction [of autism as a stigmatized identity], along with a focus on the individual differences of autism and the positive traits that these may offer, makes available a different construction of autism" (p. 19). This conceptualization and usage of the term autism asserts that autism is a social construction. It is rooted in the social model of disability that rejects disability as deviance or deficit and instead sees disability as a social construction (Brownlow, 2010). In this approach, autistic and non-autistic people are still set apart. However, instead of indicating a need to change or correct the autistic person, this approach seeks to construct a separate, desirable, and positive autistic identity.

Within the autism as difference approach, we see a dichotomy of experience where, despite an attempt to construct autism as a positive difference, stigma and separation remain at

the core of the term's usage. The autism as difference approach continues to define the autistic person in terms of their autism. In this conception, autism is central to a person's identity. As Shtayermman (2009) notes, "Because stigma arises when an individual differs from the dominant social norms in relation to a particular domain, the person's whole identity is defined by that domain" (p. 300). The autism as difference model continues to locate the autistic person outside mainstream society. Goffman's (1965/2017) work on stigma and the stigmatized person's unacceptability within society highlights that the view of autism as a difference does not necessarily honor the autistic identity as much as it simply acknowledges the power of the label. As Shtayermman (2009) points out, "levels of stigma experienced could be due to the label of having the diagnosis and not as a result of symptoms" (p. 311). This model of autism is rooted in divergence, where the autistic person lives a life that DuBois (1903/2017) might describe as double consciousness, where an autistic person can only construct self through the eyes of others.

The autism as difference approach begins to integrate and value the autistic experience and focuses on the interpretation and meaning autistic individuals give to their experiences. Ethnomethodology focuses on how we create order through commonsense rules of interaction. Just as we see Baron-Cohen looking in the 1990s at an autistic deficit in theory of mind, the lens of ethnomethodology might posit that an autistic person is incapable of creating or participating in these commonsense rules of sociological order due to these deficits (Ryan & Räisänen, 2008, p. 137). As Mead (1929/2017) would argue, the constructed self exists in comparison to others. Seeing oneself as 'other' is foundational to developing an autistic sense of self-identity separate from a physical, biologically based diagnostic frame (p. 168). This comparison emphasizes the separation between autistic and neurotypical societies.

In their research into the social experiences of autistic people diagnosed with what was formerly known as Asperger's Syndrome (AS), Ryan and Räisänen (2008) applied an interpretive frame. They found that "People with AS develop a different symbolic capacity but are very aware of 'life over there'" (p. 142). They argue that "the different symbolic capacity of people with AS should be understood in terms of difference rather than deficit" (p. 135). The autism as difference approach acknowledges that autism is more than a diagnosis or disease requiring a cure. Autism is a neurological difference that is foundational to a person's identity; however, society influences how autistic people construct that identity because it is done by setting it apart from a neurotypical ideal.

After diagnosis, many autistic people report a sense of relief. Their experiences and feelings of difference have a name. My child expressed similar feelings. However, the label alone did not change their lived experience. Over time, the diagnosis gave way to an understanding of what it means to be autistic in society. It also was the basis for them to form their autistic identity. In contrast to the diagnostic definition, the 'autism as difference' usage recognizes the humanity of the autistic person and reflects the value of neurological diversity; however, it remains problematic in that it relies on othering autism.

Beyond the Binary

While the 'autism as a condition' and 'autism as a difference' approaches continue to dominate the literature as standards for defining how we view autism and approach research in the autism community, they both have clear limitations. Neither is sufficient for capturing the perspective of autistic people, as both create a conception of autism against a neurotypical standard. A critical examination of the term reveals the challenges any definition may face, given its genesis in uneven social power structures that limit the agency of autistic people.

The term autism has power. It can divert money, provide legally required services, change caregivers' perceptions of their charges, and alter self-identity. Much of this power comes from deep, culturally embedded ableism and the subjugation of disability (Campbell, 2008; Kamperman, 2020). Critical race theory centers people marginalized by inherently racist institutions; similarly, critical autism studies centers people marginalized by an inherently ableist culture. The disabled are neither survivors of affliction nor marginalized exiles but rather resistors against the oppression of the system that labels them as autistic (Campbell, 2008, p. 160). Some may argue that a true definition of autism is impossible without destroying the institutional ableism that created it (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Walker, 2021). Society cannot create an accurate concept of autism until we fully respect the wide range of experiences of all people on the autism spectrum and work to understand the whole and complex autistic person.

Just as with many disabilities, the experiences of autistic people vary. Given the wide range of what we see as the autism spectrum, there may be an even more considerable variation. Because of this range of experiences, it is challenging to create a definition that accounts for the many experiences, contexts, and intersections of other forms of oppression (O'Dell et al., 2016, p. 175). A definition must consider the fluidity of identity while reflecting the shared experiences of autistic people in a way that fundamentally changes what the term ability means. In fact, "If we fully appreciate the importance of intersectional analysis and multiple forms of oppression, an autistic identity might be one of a number of ways in which individuals understand their experience on the autism spectrum" (O'Dell et al., 2016, p. 175). A definition of autistic identity may be impossible if we want to capture fluid and intersectional identity.

It is complicated to find an approach that reflects autistic lived experience without defining it against the ableist ideal and emphasizing ableist notions of individualism. In Runswick-Cole (2014), we see that:

Identity politics depends on the rhetoric of individual rights, and that minoritised groups must demand equality of rights for themselves by claiming both ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’. However, it is in the claim for both ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ that the ‘lived experience of disabled people’ is denied. (p. 21)

Many autistic people rely on others as part of their lived experience (Kamperman, 2020). They are interdependent; a definition that relies on division is fundamentally flawed. However, we create a dichotomy simply by creating the category of autism. Some autistic people might reject an autistic identity because using the term automatically sets forth a limiting, ableist, and individualistic binary, which makes the autistic “consigned to the category of ‘them’” (Runswick-Cole, 2014, p. 23). The label ‘autistic’ replicates ableist structures, which is troubling, but the label is necessary when autistic people are interdependent and lived experience is collocated in both sameness and difference.

Accepting Fluidity

Society is faced with complex choices within the language of autism. If we accept that research can only move forward with a defining term, then going as far as to end the term may not be practical or desired. Suppose we accept that the traditional binary conceptions of autism are incomplete and that an ableist power structure consistently influences any definition. How do we move towards a definition that accurately describes and reflects the lived experience of autistic people?

The complexity of arriving at a definition and usage for the term autism seems daunting, but it is necessary as a function of society. Interventions and services rely on diagnosis, key areas need research, and autistic people and autistic culture exist. Given that traditional models and approaches are ineffective, and we have yet to dismantle the ableist foundation on which the terminology is built, a research approach must look towards goals rather than prescriptive and narrow rules. The goals should focus on autistic self-identification and localization—a definition that connects research to lived experience.

The primary goal of consistently defining and using the term autism within society and research should be to leverage autistic-created conceptions of autism as the foundation for any research project. We must center autistic experiences and voices as “identifying how autistic people think about autism is a first step toward developing research relevant to their interests and the needs of the community” (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017, p. 11). Such an approach requires that autistic people be collaborators in the research process. Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al. (2019) set a relevant framework for emancipatory autism research that emphasizes reflexivity, collaboration, autistic ownership of research, and accessibility. The definition is then inherently localized to autistic individuals and arises out of a process of self-identification. Having autistic people set the research agenda also “[creates] a sensible connection between autism research and the everyday concerns and needs of ‘autistic’ patients and their families” (Verhoeff, 2013, p. 9). By setting this goal and requiring that research about autistic people involve autistics, we come closest to meeting the needs of a definition that can eschew traditional models and ableist ideals while still reflecting what it means to be autistic. From this understanding of how to conceptualize autism and use that conceptualization to guide research, we can turn to a broader conceptual framework that can inform other elements of the research process.

Conceptual Framework: Disability Studies and the Neurodiversity Paradigm

Disability in Higher Education: Historical Context

Society has questioned the intellectual capabilities of disabled people since recorded history began. In 355 B.C., Aristotle argued that those “born deaf become senseless and incapable of reason” (Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education, 2019). It was not until the 1700s that students who were deaf and blind started receiving any form of education. This education was far from universal across disabilities; only Deaf and Blind people were eligible. In 1864 in the U.S., the National College for the Deaf and Dumb opened (now Gallaudet). It was the only college serving male students with disabilities (Gallaudet University, n.d.). Gallaudet moved Blind students to the Maryland Institution for the Blind in 1865. Women were admitted to the National Deaf-Mute College (now Gallaudet) in 1888 (Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education, 2019). In 1899, Boston began special education classes for K-12 students, and Philadelphia followed in 1901. Teachers from local institutions trained these K-12 special education teachers. The institutions they came from were often deplorable places where children with disabilities were abandoned by their families, and early special education reflected this brutal history. While individual examples of persons with disabilities attending college exist, such as Helen Keller attending Radcliffe in the early 1900s, the secondary education prospects for most individuals with a disability, including soldiers injured in the Civil War, were bleak.

The early 1900s was a particularly dark time for the education of students with disabilities. While New Jersey funded statewide special education classes in 1911, it also began to mandate “eugenic sterilization for certain categories of adult feeble-minded” (Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education, 2019). In Germany, these sterilization laws

applied to people across broad categories of disabilities. In the U.S., the Euthanasia Society of America urged “legalizing euthanasia for ‘born defectives’ who are doomed to remain defective, “while Hitler enacted a ‘mercy killing’ program targeting disabled people (Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education, 2019). During this time, disabled people were fighting to stay alive rather than fighting for education needs. The ruling in *Wyatt v. Aderholt* ending Alabama’s eugenic sterilization laws does not happen until 1974.

After World War II, a shift began. Following World War I, the U.S. government realized that disabled soldiers returning from war needed to reintegrate into society. The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918 provided educational assistance for veterans with disabilities (Madaus, 2011, p. 6). However, the greater need began to build at the end of World War II; 2,000 soldiers survived the war with injuries leaving them paraplegic (Madaus, 2011). Many more people left their military service with other disabilities, including PTSD. A large majority of these soldiers were young and of college age. After the Korean and Vietnam Wars, even more young men with disabilities return to the U.S., seeking secondary educational opportunities. Increasing numbers of veterans and more federal funding for their education pushed universities to increase the accessibility of higher education.

Not only did veterans push for change, social changes throughout the U.S. caused by the Black civil rights movement also gave voice to disabled people. The fight for race-based civil rights transferred to the disability rights movement. In fact, “the civil rights movement and legislation, as well as education legislation at the K–12 level, served as a catalyst for an era of greatly expanded services starting in the 1970s” (Madaus, 2011, p. 9).

While the social climate was ripe for change, the efforts of disabled individuals such as Ed Roberts grew a movement that would change legislation. Roberts fought to gain entry to the

University of California, Berkeley, but even after acceptance faced barriers to his college education. Among other barriers set in his way, the Berkeley administration forced Roberts to live in the infirmary instead of a dormitory (Fischer et al., 2020). Roberts won a federal grant that allowed his group, “The Rolling Quads,” to establish a program that ultimately became the first independent living center in the United States. Roberts, along with his friend and fellow activist Judy Heumann, was instrumental in creating the legislation that became the tipping point for accessibility in higher education: section E of section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This Act was signed into law in 1977 after several sit-ins across the U.S. This law required universities that accept federal funding to accept students with disabilities and provide necessary accommodations for disabled students to access an education.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 solidified many existing provisions, such as those in the 1978 Rehabilitation, Comprehensive Services, & Developmental Disabilities Amendments of section 504, broadened the definition of disability, and provided for enforcement of many existing provisions of section 504 (Fischer et al., 2020). In response to President Reagan’s deregulation of many disability rights in the 1980s, Justin Dart traveled the country and collected stories from disabled individuals (Fischer et al., 2020). Dart attended the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act as his stories and testimony to Congress were instrumental in its passage. While the ADA changed over time, significant legal challenges, such as *Olmstead v. L.C.* in 1999, upheld its basic provisions. Implementation of the ADA over time caused agencies to limit the definition of disability and push the burden of proof of discrimination to the person with a disability (Fischer et al., 2020). Pushback against these restrictions caused the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAA), which reinstated many accommodations and broadened the definition of disability. While work remains, the efforts of disability rights advocates has forced

postsecondary education institutions to recognize the rights of students with disabilities to an equal education.

Disability Studies: The Social Model of Disability

Developing out of the radical social change of the 1960s and the disability rights movement, the social model of disability is the foundation of over thirty years of theoretical work in disability studies (Berghs et al., 2019). This social model of disability is in direct contrast to the positivist medical model of disability, which objectively views disability as a deficit: a diagnosis attached to a physical body that needs curing (Oliver, 1998).

The social model views disability as a social construct with distinct power imbalances that form both a system of restrictions and an identity set upon those with impairments (Baglieri et al., 2011). In this model, impairments are the physical or diagnostic reality. At the same time, disability is “the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from mainstream social activities” (UPIAS, 1976, as cited in Oliver, 1990, p. 11).

The social model of disability fundamentally changes our view of what it means to be disabled and who creates disability. Disability is not born when someone is born with an impairment or becomes impaired; society creates disablement and has the power to produce and reproduce that disablement through societal structures (Goodley, 2001). A diverse area of scholarship, the theoretical foundations of the social model of disability pull from “social constructionist or interpretivist, materialist, postmodernist, poststructuralist, legal, and even structural-functionalist perspectives” (Taylor, 2006, xiii).

Within the study of autism and its changing definitions, we can see the disability studies paradigm in the ‘autism as difference’ conceptualization of autism. Autism is not simply a

diagnosis or impairment, but it is regulated, like all disabilities, as a system of restriction and as an identity. It is this identity that the ‘autism as difference’ approach celebrates.

One criticism of disability studies lies within the model of disability it uses and the perspective from which disability is constructed. While the social model of disability and disability advocates using it have been emancipating and empowering, some argue that this model does not address the reality of disability.

Critical Disability Theory: Centering, Social Justice, and Activism

Critical disability theory (also called critical disability studies) has philosophical roots within the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Hall, 2019). Developed with the influences of Adorno and Horkheimer, critical theory looks to analyze and uncover the often-hidden origins of social and political structures. When applied across disciplines, this analysis method targets our assumptions that these structures are natural or unchangeable (Hall, 2019). Applied to the analysis of disability, Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) outline four principles of critical disability studies:

1. Research is not conducted free from context and requires qualitative methods.
2. Autonomy is not simply the independence that the social model of disability advocates, but complete emancipation from oppressive social structures.
3. History and current context influence the research and the researcher, and we must turn our critical lens to ourselves.
4. Critical disability research must engage in a dialogue across cultures and emancipatory practice.

Through its basis in critical theory, critical disability theory connects to other forms of critical analysis, including feminist theory and critical race theory. These connections allow analysis across the various intersectionalities of societal advantages and disadvantages (Peña et al., 2016).

Disability is not solely a social construct, and the personal, physical, and embodied human experience is still an important consideration (Shildrick, 2019). Critical disability theory critiques the dichotomy between social construction and embodiment and acknowledges that our conceptualizations of disability are “slippery, fluid, heterogeneous” (Shildrick, 2019, p.3) and intersectional (Hall, 2019). Thus, knowledge and knowledge creation can only come from research that is situated, reflexive, and local (Brown et al., 2019). Research flowing from and informed by critical disability theory must recognize the researcher’s positionality, create new knowledge that incorporates the voices of the disabled in the decision-making process, and actively challenge existing ableist power structures. While my perspective aligns with a critical disability studies lens, I have not used critical disability theory as part of my conceptual framework. My research questions are exploratory and descriptive, the traditional dissertation process does not support genuine participant-directed research, and my outcome is not activist. I use a conceptual framework fusing disability studies and the neurodiversity paradigm lenses to reconcile my perspective. The neurodiversity paradigm complements and supports the disability studies framework as it addresses intersectionality and the specific application of the disability studies framework to the autistic experience.

The Neurodiversity Paradigm

Academics have not reached a detailed agreement regarding the neurodiversity paradigm; however, an agreed-upon framework conceptualizes autism and informs action within the neurodiversity movement, a grassroots activist movement that began in the 1990s (Chapman,

2019). As Chapman (2019) notes, “since the neurodiversity movement has no leader and no textbook, the arguments and claims its proponents forward are heterogeneous” (p. 372).

However, the leading scholar working to define and apply the neurodiversity paradigm, Walker (2021), distinguishes it from the medical model of autism but also acknowledges that the neurodiversity paradigm recognizes the existence of embodied impairments that require material accommodation. Walker (2014) asserts three fundamental axioms:

1. Neurodiversity is a form of humanity that is natural and valuable.
2. The idea that one ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ type of brain or mind exists or that there is one ‘right’ style of neurocognitive functioning is a culturally constructed falsehood. This construction, like those that hold there is one ‘normal’ or ‘right’ ethnicity, gender, or culture, is not productive for society or human well-being.
3. The social dynamics surrounding neurodiversity are like the social dynamics attached to other forms of diversity such as race, gender, or culture. These dynamics include social power inequalities and the ways that, when embraced, diversity is a potential source of creativity and strength.

By including the neurodiversity paradigm as part of the informing conceptual framework for this study, we can reconcile the critique of the disability studies framework that it does not address the real, embodied experience of autism in its social model of disability. As Walker (2021) notes:

The neurodiversity paradigm, properly understood and applied in conjunction with the social model of disability, thus suggests an approach to autistic well-being based in de-pathologizing autism, accepting autistic people as autistic people, and actively working to enable the full societal inclusion of autistic people by finding better ways to accommodate their access needs (p. 64).

Using both complementary frames to inform choices in study design and data analysis provides a foundation needed to examine the problem of the study and address the research questions.

Given that I want to understand how autistic college students naturally form academic and social support networks during their transition into higher education, it is helpful to know what the literature says about support networks and first-year transition and whether it addresses autism and autistic voices. Additionally, it is imperative to recognize where literature in the current academic conversation surrounding autism uses disability studies or neurodiversity paradigm lenses. Using this framework to analyze the literature may identify areas that need further exploration. Research founded in this conceptual framework can lead to a deeper understanding of the autistic experience in higher education, elevate disabled voices, and find ways that new research might serve to challenge existing power structures and inequities.

Academic and Social Support Networks

Support is the “assistance and protection given to others” (Langford et al., 1997, p. 95). It must be helpful and protective to the person receiving the support. Anderson et al. (2019) operationalize support systems in college “as networks, individuals, or services that students seek and/or use in an effort to succeed in college” (p. 18). Support in the higher education context can be divided into two main categories: academic and social support.

Academic Support

Two main support modes exist: helping students obtain “better functional capabilities,” such as improving academic skills through workshops, and “changing the educational environment,” including adjusting the teaching approach (Lipka et al., 2019, p. 3). Elements of academic support can be grouped into three principal areas:

1. Educational Setting Characteristics with Social and Emotional Effects - small class size, emotional support, supporting metacognitive skills.
2. Metacognitive-pedagogical practice - adjusted teaching or educational support, supporting independence and autonomy, modeling, division of material into smaller units.
3. Support qualities and training – mentoring, knowledge of services, positive interaction, the teacher creates classroom or university creates the campus climate.

There are social and emotional components to helping students develop better functional capabilities to perform within the academic setting. Additionally, people involved in providing academic support may also supply social support. However, academic support is distinct in its focus on skills and performance related to academic function. In contrast, social support centers on the “wider social world of the university” (Wilcox et al., 2005, p. 709).

Social Support

Early work to conceptualize social support focused on specific functions of personal relationships that fulfilled support needs, specifically “attachment, social integration, opportunity for nurturance, reassurance of worth, a sense of reliable alliance and the obtaining of guidance” (Wilcox et al., 2005, p. 708). However, more current conceptualizations separate the structural aspects of relationships and focus instead on the functional utility of the relationship and the perceived or actual support received. Within this more practical conceptualization, we can see four defining types of social support defined by Langford et al. (1997):

1. Emotional – “Provision of caring, empathy, love, and trust” (p. 96).
2. Instrumental – Tangible aid such as financial help or physical labor.

3. Informational – Information provided to another person for aid in problem-solving.
4. Appraisal – Information provided to another person for help in self-evaluation. These can be affirmations or statements of appropriateness about the other person's actions.

In this model, support is not about function or action but instead focuses on whether or not the support relationship feels supportive and is helpful to the person receiving support.

Within the literature, we can see that these two support components, academic and social support, are studied; a lesser body of literature describes these components as an integrated whole (Thompson, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2005). Cai and Richdale (2016) found that autistic college students tend to experience adequate academic support but say that social support is lacking. However, within the university environment, we see an overlap in these two support sub-categories. A residence hall student assistant may function as a locus of social support for a homesick student and as an academic mentor that directs a student to attend tutoring when they struggle with a class. Because many complexities exist with academic and social support networks, higher education researchers advocate studying support as a “process in order to better understand how support is communicated as well as to explore the developing relationships” (Thompson, 2008, p.125). For this reason, I have chosen to focus on how students form support networks within my research questions.

In framing my study, it is essential to clarify what support may look like for autistic students. Support networks often rely on the use of shared social spaces and the development of friendships between individuals in those spaces. As Brownlow et al. (2015) find, the idea that autistic college students cannot form relationships or need institutional intervention to make

them better skilled at making friends is a dominant assumption. Given the predominant view that disability and deficit are barriers to autistic friendships, it is “unsurprising that research that has addressed the development and role of friendship for people with autism is very limited” (Brownlow et al., 2015, p. 189). Using a disability studies framework, Brownlow et al. (2015) assert that researchers must redefine what friendship and social engagement mean in terms not centered on neurotypical standards of friendship. We should consider alternative spaces and ways of friend-making, including online spaces. Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al. (2013) gathered data from online discussion forums and print publications for autistic adults. They found a need for safe “offline” spaces for autistic adults to form social networks as well as spaces that are “autism only” spaces (p. 367). Their work further underscores a need to consider support in all forms without regard to non-autistic conceptions of support. Brownlow et al. (2015) directly argue for increased research into neurodiverse spaces where autistic students can develop friendships. They also argue for a greater understanding of how autistic adults form and define their friendships. This research with autistic adults can apply to research on social support within autistic populations in the more specific higher education context.

Among the literature that addresses academic and social support provided to autistic students in higher education institutions, Kuder and Accardo (2018) conducted a meta-analysis on the impact and effectiveness of institutional programs. Their search found eight studies, and their analysis concluded that specialized, non-academic supports are necessary and that those programs must be individualized to the student. Because there are so few studies and the results were mixed, Kuder and Accardo (2018) could not locate any specific program or support recommendations. Kuder and Accardo (2018) frame their research from a deficit perspective that highlights the “challenges faced by students with ASD” (p. 724). Their method also focuses on

understanding autism and the needs of autistic students from institutional and programmatic perspectives. Kuder and Accardo (2018) included only studies that evaluated the effectiveness of existing programs and interventions and expressly excluded qualitative research that did not measure effectiveness. Without centering those with autism, research on support for autistic college students may remain incomplete as it may fail to capture the complexity of the autistic experience. In Kuder and Accardo's (2018) study, the findings indicate that the lack of autistic voices in the evaluated studies may have been a reason for the mixed and non-specific results. Additionally, the focus on researching and providing guidance on current support programs and structures may reinforce the ableism inherent in those structures. Research that centers the autistic student using disability studies and neurodiversity paradigm lenses may clarify specific areas of strength for autistic students that university programs can then work to reinforce and support.

Interestingly, Accardo et al. (2018) used their literature review to conduct a two-year mixed-methods study that more rigorously evaluates the support experiences and preferences of autistic college students. This study centers the opinions of autistic students; however, students were limited in how they could respond. Accardo et al. (2018) limited survey choices to the concepts discovered in the initial literature review. While they captured qualitative data, the study was neither participatory nor inductive. The interviews were highly structured and focused on the pre-determined list of supports. Most of their subjects were students who had chosen to take a university-provided workshop and may have already been predisposed to take advantage of traditional supports. The study's main finding is that autistic students want personalized supports, which aligns with findings from earlier work by Anderson et al. (2017). Consistent with the findings from this study, Kuder and Accardo (2018), and Anderson et al. (2017), there

appears to be a theme regarding autistic students' varied support experiences and a resulting finding that autistic college students need individualized support.

Research examining the lived experiences of autistic college students and their support needs has been equally inconclusive. Gelbar et al. (2014) conducted a literature review to look more closely at the individual support experiences of autistic college students. While Gelbar et al. (2014) center autistic experience by making it an inclusion criterion in their analysis, their findings were as inconclusive as those of Kuder and Accardo (2018). Most notably, they could only include twenty articles and had to exclude twice that many because they did not reflect the first-hand experiences of autistic students. Of the twenty articles they could include, 90% were single-student case studies. While there were consistent findings that students in the studies experienced loneliness, anxiety, and depression, Gelbar et al. (2014) described the research landscape in this area as “fragmented” (p. 2600).

Hillier et al. (2018) evaluated a specific support intervention that has shown effectiveness in non-autistic students to address this fragmented area of research. This study used mixed methods to capture, in part, the experiences and first-hand accounts of autistic students. Hillier et al. (2018) evaluated a support group within a university disability services office. While there were selection bias concerns as students in the program had self-identified to the disability services office and opted into the program, they did see meaningful results. Students in the program had a high rate of graduation, decreased feelings of anxiety and loneliness, and increased self-esteem. A later study by Ncube et al. (2019) evaluating a similar but different program found no evidence of increased perceived social support among autistic college students in their 1-year program. While the results of Hillier et al. (2018) were positive towards their program, both studies underscore an issue with programmatic support interventions and the

evaluation of such programs. Research shows that autistic students are reluctant to share their diagnosis and register with disability services offices (Hillier et al., 2018). Both studies had challenges finding participants. The participants were almost exclusively white and male. In designing studies to understand the processes that autistic students use to form support networks, it may be essential to work outside the typical disability services structure and find ways to recruit participants that support participants' sense of agency and independence and provide relative anonymity to official university power structures. Additionally, this research reinforces qualitative data collection methods necessary for capturing the full range of autistic student experience. Hillier et al. (2018) used minimal qualitative data, and Ncube et al. (2019) only used quantitative data. The lack of qualitative data meant that students' voices and experiences were not fully present. Finally, finding study participants representing a more comprehensive range of gender, race, and ethnicity would be beneficial.

Of note, Anderson et al. (2019) tried to address the issue of low participation by autistic college students in research and concerns about the lack of autistic student voices in research on this topic. In their study, Anderson et al. (2019) focused on finding what supports college students find effective and further limited their scope to support within students' first-year transition. Using qualitative methods to search an online discussion forum whose participants were autistic college students, researchers used a priori codes to analyze existing discussion posts. Student posts included in the study named a wide-ranging network of support encompassing academic and social support obtained through official university sources and the students' broader community. Interestingly, Anderson et al. (2019) discounted any support not provided by the institution as they felt that "colleges and universities have little role in developing such systems" (p. 19). By discounting this part of an autistic student's support

system, the study fails to capture the entirety of a student's support experience. While acknowledging that their findings and the findings of Gelbar et al. (2014) show that parents are a significant component of the support network for autistic first-year students, the study is limited by the refusal to examine components outside the official university structure. When the social sphere of the university extends beyond official university programs and the academic classroom, it may be beneficial to have a richer understanding of that complexity. An added limitation of this study is its reliance on static discussion board postings. While innovative in its attempts to address fundamental challenges experienced by researchers who work with autistic college students, this qualitative inquiry is not iterative and inductive in a way that supports a deeper understanding of students' lived experience.

The literature exploring academic and social support for autistic college students is growing but still limited in several ways that my study looks to address. Researchers have increasingly tried to move the focus from caregivers and institutional actors to autistic students. However, there is limited progress toward engaging autistic students in the research and amplifying autistic voices within the data analysis. When researchers try to center the lived experiences of autistic college students, they continue to rely on quantitative, mixed methods, and highly structured qualitative data collection and analysis methods that use a priori codes and existing theoretical models in a deductive process. Multiple challenges exist in participant recruitment, and the recruitment process can create potential selection bias if it samples students registered with university disability services offices. The existing literature highlights several areas for attention, including recruitment outside of disability services, maintaining distance from official university programs, the need to diversify recruitment, and the need to use an iterative data collection process where students are engaged in dialogue that allows for inductive

data analysis. Additional research can fill these gaps and increase understanding of autistic college students' academic and social support networks, particularly as they intersect with autistic students' first-year transition, as Anderson et al. (2019) started to explore.

Academic Transition

Parents of young children learn to give their children support through transitions. These supports can be as simple as a five-minute warning before leaving a playdate or a reminder that they get to read two more books before bedtime. As an adult, I have found that transitions continue to be challenging in new ways, and I have experienced stress from moving, divorce, and other life events that affect my well-being (George, 1993). Additionally, transitions that occur at one point in our life can have an effect far down the road, with disorderly transitions potentially resulting in adverse outcomes in the long term (George, 1993). For example, someone who starts a new job and fails to make friends at that job might never enjoy their work and quit much earlier than they might have if they had a more orderly and successful transition.

For autistic people, transitions may be different and potentially more stressful due to the nature of autism, co-occurring diagnoses, and other unknown factors (First et al., 2016; Petcu et al., 2021). For autistic people transitioning to adulthood, studies have shown that increased depression and anxiety may occur when support structures change and provided services may end (First et al., 2016). Regarding the transition into higher education, autistic students “may struggle with elements central to college life: socialization, new and changing routines and schedules, independent living, and a lack of external monitoring and guidance” (Wei et al., 2014, p. 1160). However, these struggles may not differ from non-autistic students going through this same transition (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). Autistic students entering higher education tend to have a positive self-concept of their academic abilities, even if they may have a lower self-conception

of their social abilities when compared to non-autistic peers (Fernandes et al., 2021).

Additionally, a third of autistic college students did not report seeing themselves as disabled or having differing support needs, even if they had previously received support or special education services during high school (Fernandes et al., 2021). Understanding why academic transition matters for college students, what the literature tells us about the unique experiences of autistic students during their first-year transition, and where gaps exist in this literature is critical to framing this study.

Goldrick-Rab et al. (2007) identified that research on the academic transition to higher education centers around two key components: entering college and graduating. While autistic students have different entry barriers (Roux et al., 2015), the literature on students' ability to persist to graduation once they attend college is important for this study. A student's first-year transition may directly impact retention and completion, and a broad body of research has examined this process (Pascarella, 1985; Schlossberg, 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Students' social and academic adjustment to the environment is central to this transition.

The transition process can be somewhat predictable, and it is this predictability that administrators in higher education have sought to plan around when designing ways to support first-year students. Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory argues that transitions such as the one from high school to college all have standard features. Depending on how a student navigates transition, these features can be sources of strength or deficit. Regardless of these strengths and deficits, transitions are challenging because the process disrupts our sense of belonging. By understanding this disruption in feelings of belonging that comes with transition, administrators have looked to find ways to help students feel like they belong at their university.

Students who live in college residence halls arrive to their names on the door, floor social activities, scavenger hunts, and other carefully crafted programs to help them feel more connected to their new home. To increase feelings of belonging through this transition, universities have looked for ways to help students feel more connected to campus and its culture. Tinto (1993) theorizes that the transition into college will be most successful and cause higher levels of student persistence if students become academically and socially integrated into the college environment. Tinto's model is "essentially a socialization model that focuses on individual adjustment to the college environment" (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007, p. 2463). Students need this adjustment period because transitions fundamentally threaten their sense of belonging. Students who do not feel connected may be less likely to want to stay. Beyond simply feeling connected, students may also need to engage in connecting activities.

As a first-year student, I might feel like I belong, but do I need to demonstrate that belonging through my actions? Astin (1999) builds on Tinto's (1993) model arguing that involvement behaviors, rather than simply a feeling of inclusion or integration, are essential. We may be able to observe student integration through the development of friendships, participation in support groups, contact with faculty, and participation in clubs and activities. Engagement is a way to evaluate how the university shapes and channels student integration and involvement. It is also a good way to know if students behave in ways that indicate integration (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Kuh (2003) argues that "Identifying who isn't engaged and getting them involved is of primary importance" to improving transition outcomes (p. 27). Despite being foundational to much of the research into students' transition into higher education, Tinto's (1993) model and those that developed from it have faced critique in recent years that they may fail to accurately account for the different transition experiences of marginalized student populations.

Many people think that a typical college first-year student is 18, white, affluent, and living in a campus residence hall at a 4-year university. Despite first-year college students becoming more diverse across multiple dimensions, this mental model of the typical college freshman persists (De Brey et al., 2021). As Deil-Amen (2015) notes, the theories of Tinto, Astin, and Pascarella are the lenses through which many higher education researchers have viewed student persistence after the transition. These theorists researched traditional students to build their models. While the essential concepts of integration and involvement may still apply to marginalized populations, Guiffrida (2006) argues that the diverse range of students' experiences and needs should be integrated into Tinto's theory "with the goal of strengthening it, enhancing its cultural sensitivity, and making it more descriptive of minority student academic achievement and persistence" (p. 453). For students with a disability, this would include ensuring that models of student transition account for disabled student culture and experience. For autistic students, applying the lens of the neurodiversity paradigm requires working to support the full social inclusion of autistic students. Applying this lens may mean administrators must understand autistic students' access needs to achieve integration. It is necessary to keep in mind that while the existing theory surrounding students' first-year transition emphasizes the importance of belonging, adjustment, integration, and engagement, models developed to explain the experiences of autistic students may need to be more nuanced, robust, or different.

In a recent literature review, Nuske et al. (2019) focused on qualitative and mixed methods studies that examined autistic students' transition to higher education. Their review evaluated the experiences of students and their families and intentionally worked to center the voices of autistic students through their inclusion criteria. As with other work in this area, a limited number of articles met these criteria. Within the eleven articles found, there were only 92

total participants. Using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory model, Nuske et al. (2019) identified commonalities at the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem levels. Interestingly, they find more reportable detail and information related to the microsystem. These findings may be a function of the included studies' focus on student voices and the qualitative research methods used. Nuske et al. (2019) found that their recommendations matched those of Kuder and Accardo (2018) regarding support for autistic students. They found that higher education institutions should provide individualized supports. Nuske et al. (2019) identify that higher education needs research focusing on outcomes that provide an in-depth exploration of students' experiences during their transition. For the students studied, we need to increase participant diversity. Building on earlier themes from the literature on academic and social support for autistic students, the literature review by Nuske et al. (2019) continues to highlight a lack of unified recommendations that could be due to the individualized needs of autistic students, the lack of in-depth data, or both.

While not solely focused on autistic students' transition to higher education, the literature review of Anderson et al. (2018) does name areas of interest relative to this transition. The authors' review of 17 studies included 121 autistic participants and identified barriers and facilitators to autistic participants' transition to adulthood. The facilitators of individualized support, gradual transition, and information sharing are relevant to this study. As with most of the earlier literature, Anderson et al. (2018) found a lack of diversity within the populations studied as well as limitations within the study design of most of the research. Specifically, they found that most researchers did not tailor their methods to the unique needs of the autistic population. They highlight the need for researchers to modify consent protocols and interviewing techniques. Additionally, the work of Anderson et al. (2018) reinforces the need for future

research to establish a more substantial evidence base that can “inform the development of interventions” and improve the functioning of the autistic students’ entire support team (p. 326). While not explicitly focused on higher education transitions, the findings of Anderson et al. (2018) highlight the individualized support needs of autistic people in transition and detail unique research design considerations.

When looking at the higher education transition, it is crucial to consider what may be unique to the experiences of autistic students. In a quantitative study using Lambe et al.’s transition to university questionnaire, Lei et al. (2020) analyzed autistic students' transition compared to equally situated non-autistic students. Lei et al.’s (2020) findings note that autistic students tended to have higher levels of anticipatory stress before starting at university and smaller support networks once on campus. However, autistic and non-autistic students perceived these networks as equally supportive. Most interestingly, Lei et al. (2020) found that higher levels of social anxiety are related to higher levels of perceived distress. These higher levels of social anxiety existed for both the autistic and non-autistic populations. The researchers make some recommendations specific to the needs of autistic students during transition; however, Lei et al. (2020) find that all students would benefit from support related to reducing social anxiety. Of note, this study had an unusual ratio of female participants (1:1 female to male). Few studies address the impact of sex differences on the practical use of support networks for autistic college students. Like concerns found in other studies, issues with the number of participants and their diversity may impact results. Additionally, the authors found that producing a detailed understanding of how autistic students settle into the transition requires researchers to take data at multiple points throughout the process. This study hints at the need for increased use of

universal design in support programs, as all autistic and non-autistic students may benefit from similar supports.

Despite research showing that a strengths-based approach is efficacious, there is a tendency for well-meaning people and institutions to design deficit-based programs focused on fixing or correcting autistic students. Using an extensive national data set, the research of Petcu et al. (2021) takes a high-level look at factors that may contribute to the successful transition of autistic students. Petcu et al. (2021) use the CIRP Freshman Survey given before the beginning of students' first year and the Your First College Year (YFCY) survey administered after the first year. Researchers examined first-year college students' characteristics and behavior during their first year. With this data, they can compare autistic students and those with Learning Disabilities (LD) to see how the populations may differ. Interestingly, autistic students were more likely than their peers with LD to disclose their diagnosis to disability services offices at the university. However, the number of autistic students who persist and graduate was lower than those with LD. While the characteristics of both populations were similar, the autistic student population tended to be more male. Both groups reported low use of campus resources despite data showing that using these services results in increased levels of persistence. Petcu et al. (2021) noted that "the findings revealed that when providing support and services for students with disabilities, it is essential to examine students' strengths and support they really need, due to the varied characteristics of this population" (p. 10). Petcu et al. (2021) use high-level quantitative data rather than the experiences of autistic first-year students, and their research reinforces many of the previous themes. The results indicate a need to focus on the specific, varied needs of autistic students at the individual level when designing support programs. Additionally, this research

highlights the need for transition support programs to focus on enhancing student strengths rather than repairing deficits.

For all students, the transition into the higher education environment can challenge students' sense of belonging and create barriers that may affect their long-term ability to persist to graduation. Tinto's (1975, 1993) theories frequently frame research on academic transition. Tinto's research indicates that students must adjust and integrate into the university environment to successfully transition. Critiques of Tinto's model indicate it may need to be adjusted to capture the experiences and needs of students in traditionally marginalized populations, including the population of autistic students (Deil-Amen, 2015; Guiffrida, 2006). Within the literature surrounding the transition experiences of autistic students, there are similar themes to those from the literature on academic and social support networks. Research is limited in the number and diversity of participants, and there is a general need to increase the research activity in these areas. Unambiguous evidence is present in the existing literature that the needs of autistic college students going through academic transition are varied. The consistently small number of study participants may contribute to this finding because it is hard to locate consistently occurring needs with small sample sizes. This finding may also be due to the nature of autism itself. As something with fluid and complex definitions and a broad spectrum of experiences, it may be impossible to find clear commonalities. Despite this lack of clarity and the inherent research challenges with the population, the literature argues for future research that has a more robust evidence base, uses methods tailored to the needs of the autistic population, takes data from multiple time points during the transition, and takes a strengths-based approach focused on individual student experiences.

Conclusion

Our view of autism has changed since the medical community developed the autism diagnosis in the early 1900s. Moving from a medicalized model of autism to one that acknowledges autism as a form of natural human diversity and an identity, our understanding of autism and autistic students has changed. The construct of autism as a neurological difference developed from the social model of disability. The social model views disability as a social construct with distinct power imbalances that form both a system of restrictions and an identity set upon those with impairments (Baglieri et al., 2011). The social model of disability is the foundation for theoretical work within disability studies. Using both disability studies and the neurodiversity paradigm as a conceptual framework for this study, I have created a foundation necessary for examining the problem of the study and addressing the research questions. Additionally, these frames can supply a lens through which I can view and evaluate the relevant academic and social support literature for autistic first-year students.

Literature on academic and social supports for autistic students as well as on the transition experiences of first-year autistic students exists; however, there is little research at the intersection of these topics. In each of these areas, researchers consistently identify a lack of research. The research that does exist has tended to ignore the voices of autistic students and their lived experiences. This research tends to be quantitative, mixed methods, or highly structured qualitative research. Qualitative research that uses inductive methods for developing codes, themes, and descriptions of the processes involved in autistic students' transition into higher education and their experiences of academic and social support are lacking. Within the literature, there are limitations in the number of studies, the number of participants, the diversity of participants, and participant recruitment. Researchers call for future research that centers the

voices of autistic students and their experiences and recognizes the varied and individual needs of autistic students. There is a need for research that uses methods tailored to the autistic population's specific needs, is strengths-based, and looks at the transition process from multiple time points. Research of this nature is necessary because autistic students persist to graduation in lower numbers than their non-autistic peers despite having the academic skills necessary for completing a degree. Understanding how autistic students create academic and social support networks and how they experience them during their first-year transition fills identified research gaps. That knowledge may also inform how universities can systemically change for the better.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

And I guess, also, just don't be in your own head too much. It's very easy to be like, 'Oh, those people don't wanna hang out with me. I'd better leave.' But, like, that usually is not really the case. – Rinus

Research about autistic students drastically underrepresents autistic voices. I have seen well-meaning faculty, staff, and administrators postulate about how to support students without really understanding the students' perspectives. Given that we do not understand what autistic first-year students naturally do to build support on campus, I want to hear from students about their transition to understand the processes they use to build support. I also want to understand how they experience external forces that might influence their support network. I use a grounded theory methodological perspective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and employ constructivist grounded theory methods to develop the research design for the study (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014). Using constructivist grounded theory methodology and methods allows me to function as an interpreter of the experiences that autistic students share. This research design allows me to develop a resulting model or theory with the students' direct contributions to the research's final product.

Methodological Perspective and Methods

I employ a grounded theory methodological perspective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2008, 2014) to explore how autistic first-year students create academic and social support networks during their first-year transition into the university setting. I hope the resulting model, or theory grounded in data, will help faculty, staff, and administrators better support autistic students. Qualitative methods are best suited for answering my research questions:

1. How do autistic first-year students experience and manage the development, growth, and maintenance of academic and social support networks?
2. What are the facilitators and barriers to autistic first-year students' experience of effective and meaningful support?

A quantitative approach would not be valuable in this research as the research questions are not experimental; this also eliminates mixed methods as a methodology.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) define methodology as a way of thinking about our world and social reality. In contrast, methods are the strategies, tools, and techniques for collecting and analyzing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Classic grounded theory informs my research methodology as it is a systemic, inductive, and comparative approach to inquiry into social processes intended to result in a substantive theory, model, or framework that conceptually explains the process (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014). This resulting model is grounded in the lived experiences of people within the social process. I choose a constructivist grounded theory strategy for developing my research methods as this perspective assumes that grounded theory is constructed through interactions with people and the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Grounded Theory

Classical grounded theory methodology begins with the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a challenge to research practices at the time that emphasized hypotheses derived from grand social theories such as those of Marx and Durkheim (Bryant, 2017). Glaser and Strauss (1967) outlined a systematic approach that they hoped would improve the rigor of qualitative research. Researchers apply this systematic approach inductively or abductively rather than as a deductive test of an existing theory (Bryant, 2017). Therefore, research within the grounded theory methodology is more exploratory and meant to analyze actions and processes over

thematic or structural analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Finally, classical grounded theory is iterative and comparative, where data collection and analysis co-occur and drive the research direction as it occurs (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014). Research designs situated in a grounded theory methodology move beyond the description of social processes to uncover how the processes occur.

As a way of thinking about the social reality of autistic first-year students and the social processes happening as they form support networks during their transition to college, grounded theory as a guiding methodology fits the aims of my research and within the existing literature as outlined in Chapter 2 (Accardo et al., 2018; Anderson et al., 2017, 2018; Cai & Richdale, 2016; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Gelbar et al., 2014; Hillier et al., 2018; Lei et al., 2020; Ncube et al., 2019; Petcu et al., 2021; Thompson, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2005). Research within the autistic college student population frequently uses deductive methods. These studies take existing theory developed from research on neurotypical students and test hypotheses about autistic experience against that theory. This approach uses neurotypical students as a yardstick against which autistic students are measured and is frequently based on the medical model of disability. Research using inductive methods and qualitative methodology has relied heavily on the accounts of parents or university staff and faculty rather than the voices of autistic students. These approaches can be ableist, marginalizing, and inaccurate representations of the autistic experience and perspective. My study focuses on understanding students' lived experiences to develop a model or substantive theory rather than testing predetermined variables that might affect autistic first-year students' support networks.

Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods

While suitable as a guiding methodological perspective for my study, Glaser and Strauss' (1967) original methods were conceptualized out of the positivist and post-positivist traditions. These methods presumed a fixed reality discovered from the data and deemphasized the interaction and influence of the researcher within the research process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With time, scholars have developed methods incorporating interpretive, constructivist, postmodern, and critical approaches to grounded theory research design (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Clarke, 2005). These approaches to method, research strategy, tools, and techniques, adjust the researcher's position from being a detached analyst to a recognized participant (Clarke, 2005). Constructivist grounded theory is less rigid than traditional grounded theory in the ontological perspective underlying its analysis methods.

I choose constructivist grounded theory methods informed by a disability studies and neurodiversity paradigm conceptual framework because this strategy addresses the main problems with deductive, informant-centered research. Constructivist grounded theory uses inductive analysis to investigate and understand a social process where no prior theoretical models exist or do not exist within a given context or for a particular population (Charmaz, 2008, 2014). Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory methods promote intensive interviews as a key form of data collection, and this interview approach is well-suited for understanding the lived experiences of autistic students. Additionally, the constant comparative method of data analysis is a hallmark of the methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Charmaz (2014) further refines the constant comparative approach to ensure a more interactive process between myself and my participants. While a fully participatory research approach where autistic students lead the research and serve as co-researchers would be ideal and better serve emancipatory aims, the

traditional dissertation process does not support using these methods. As an alternative, constructivist grounded theory methods facilitate the interaction of participants through the constant comparative method of data analysis and member-checking as part of theorizing and model development.

The disability studies and neurodiversity paradigm conceptual framework bring a set of sensitizing concepts and assumptions that serve as a point of origin from which I can think about the data and its analysis (Bryant, 2017). Additionally, a disability studies and neurodiversity paradigm conceptual framework guide my choices, including my objective to use a strengths-based approach that centers the voices of autistic students (Baglieri et al., 2011; Berghs et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2019; Walker, 2014, 2021).

Study Design

While not prescriptive or rigid in its design guidelines, constructivist grounded theory methods inform my strategies to collect and analyze data (Charmaz, 2014). The study takes place in the 2022-2023 academic year and recruits autistic college students in the United States through varying sampling methods. I collect data about students' experiences through intensive interviews using Charmaz's (2014) interviewing framework and a detailed questionnaire. Data is analyzed systematically using constant comparative coding, researcher memoing, and theoretical saturation of themes and codes to develop a model or theory. The data has been and will continue to be managed and stored in ways that respect participant confidentiality. Before conducting this study, I applied for and received approval from the Northern Arizona University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix A).

Study Site

The site for this study is the online e-interviewing platform. In-person interviews have traditionally been the preferred method for conducting interviews in qualitative research because they are perceived to positively affect rapport and allow the researcher to view body language (Irani, 2019). Many historical drawbacks to online interviews, such as lack of technical knowledge by participants, lack of comfort with the medium, or security of the participants' data, have been addressed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gray et al., 2020). I use the Zoom video conferencing platform because it best facilitates access to participants and may provide autistic participants with unique benefits over in-person interviews.

This study's population is historically difficult to access, given the small percentage of autistic adults attending college and the limited number of incoming first-year students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Shattuck et al., 2012). Conducting interviews via Zoom allows me access to participants who may be inaccessible due to travel time or cost. Additionally, it allows me access to students attending a variety of universities. Since my research questions are not focused on any single university or program, using Zoom allows me to include student experiences from multiple settings in the model. Finally, online interviews allow flexibility in scheduling that would not be possible for in-person interviews. Given college students' schedules, rescheduling interviews or scheduling them at times outside of typical business hours is often necessary. Online interviews are easily rescheduled and allow for flexible times.

The online interview platform provides unique benefits that my participants may prefer. Zoom and the consent process enhance accessibility for people with different communication needs and preferences. Participants can interview with video and audio, audio only, or the Zoom

text chat function. Additionally, participants control the interview location. While instructed in the screening process to attend the interview from a safe, quiet, and private location, participants control that environment. Environment choice can facilitate feelings of comfort that enhance the interview process (Irani, 2019).

Participants

All participants are autistic young adults attending full-time at a 4-year college or university in the United States. I identify participants using a combination of purposive and theoretical sampling consistent with constructivist grounded theory methodology. While theoretical sampling is the traditional form of sampling in grounded theory, Charmaz (2014) identifies that purposive sampling is an appropriate first step before undertaking theoretical sampling. Purposive sampling allows me to identify relevant participants related to the phenomenon of interest. To be included as a participant, students must meet each of these criteria:

- previously diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as defined in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) or identify as autistic;
- attending a 4-year college or university;
- in their first year of attendance;
- enrolled full-time (taking at least 12 credit hours of classes or otherwise identified as full-time by their university);
- attending classes primarily in person on campus;
- did not have prior college attendance (excluding high school dual enrollment or non-degree-seeking transfer credits); and
- are over 18.

From this purposive sample, I conduct further theoretical sampling to select those students who have the potential to help form the best theory. The constant comparative data collection and analysis method is key to the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). This iterative process requires that as data is collected and analyzed from the purposive sample, I use theoretical sampling to select participants for further interviews. Participants with specific experiences are selected, and interview topics and questions adapt as the research process unfolds. The theoretical sampling process allows me to obtain rich data, inductively uncover emergent themes, seek alternative data to confirm or refute emerging themes, and collaborate with participants on the results (Charmaz, 2014).

Recruitment

Because I am investigating inductively or abductively an area that is not well-understood, it is difficult to know how many interviews to conduct until data collection and analysis begin. Once interviews begin and the iterative process of constant comparative analysis starts, a researcher using constructivist grounded theory methods pursues theoretical sampling to develop and saturate categories, perform member checking, and create a model (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) argues that for some constructivist grounded theory studies, 12 interviews may be sufficient. In a literature review of grounded theory studies, Thomson (2010) found a median of 20 interviews per study. Saldaña (2021) highlights a range of recommendations on the number of interviews. I conduct interviews to reach theoretical plausibility (Charmaz, 2014).

I conduct a targeted call for research participants at one university and distribute recruitment materials across various online forums and platforms (see Appendices B-D for recruitment emails, social media posts, and fliers). I additionally encourage participants to send recruitment materials to other autistic first-year students as a form of snowball sampling.

Interested prospective participants contact me via email or text or complete screening via an online questionnaire to determine eligibility. Prospective participants choose their screening method: telephone, text response, online questionnaire, or Zoom call. After determining they meet the inclusion criteria, I schedule an interview time or send a follow-up email to schedule. I provide an interview confirmation via email. Confirmation emails contain information on accessing the interview, recommendations for using a safe, comfortable, and private space, a copy of potential interview questions, and instructions for reviewing the informed consent form.

After each interview, I email participants a \$20 gift card for their time and inconvenience. I based this amount on a reasonable hourly pay for student workers at a university with a 60-90 minute time commitment. Prior to the interview, I remind the subjects that their participation is voluntary and that I will still send a gift card in a prorated amount if they end their participation. I send participants who have interviewed more than once compensation after each interview, and I self-fund the purchase of gift cards.

Informed Consent

I will not collect data without IRB approval (Appendix A) and informed consent from participants. After obtaining IRB approval, I begin recruitment and screening. During the interview, I review the consent script (Appendix B) with each participant, answer any questions, and verbally confirm consent to start the interview. I record the review of the consent form with each participant's permission.

Data Collection

I begin data collection using an initial one-on-one intensive interview consistent with the guidelines provided by Charmaz (2014). I conduct interviews consistent with the iterative, constant comparative method central to constructivist grounded theory (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz,

2014). In this method, data collection, researcher memoing, and analysis occur together in cycles. I develop provisional conceptual categories from the interview data and my researcher memos from the first interviews. These emergent categories guide questioning and theoretical sampling in subsequent interviews. Through this iterative process, I adjust my interview guide and detailed questionnaire to target these emergent conceptual categories to learn more about them. As I develop categories into themes and a theoretical direction, subsequent interviews also serve as member-checking, where I involve participants in reviewing my initial analysis.

Intensive Interview Approach

Intensive interviews are one-sided conversations gently guided by the researcher to explore participants' lived experiences related to the topic (Charmaz, 2014). Ideally, as the participants talk, the researcher listens and learns. I designed an interview guide to help me with question ideas and options during the interview; however, I do not use the guide as a script (Appendix C). While Charmaz (2014) indicates that a constructivist grounded theory approach to intensive interviews would begin with a few broad, open-ended questions to prompt participants to tell their stories, this approach can be less effective when interviewing autistic college students. Upon pilot testing questions with my daughter, an autistic second-year college student, I discovered that broad, open-ended questions were discomforting, confusing, and considered too vague and indirect. Seidmann (2021) noted this issue in research with autistic adults and found that the intensive interview practice was effective if modified for the population. Nind (2008) reviewed the literature surrounding methods for qualitative interviews with people with learning, communication, and other disabilities. Nind (2008) and Seidmann (2021) suggest modifications, including increased rapport building, increased use of reflective listening techniques, decreased use of broad, open-ended questions, and increased use of direct questioning, probing, and answer

checking. My approach is, therefore, based on the intensive interview approach outlined by Charmaz (2014), with modifications as needed based on Nind (2008) and Seidmann (2021).

It is essential that I develop rapport with participants. I intentionally share some of my background and why I am interested in my research before beginning initial interviews. I also invite participants to ask me questions. I provide participants with the possible questions in their confirmation email and instruction before the interview that I will ask open-ended questions, knowing they can seem broad. I ask participants to let me know if a question is too broad and needs to be more specific. As participants answer, I ask subsequent probing questions to elicit additional details or specific examples of critical information. I repeatedly ask questions with slight language changes to elicit detail when needed. This modification and probing process is necessary, given the potential tendency for autistic participants to give short or narrowly tailored responses during semi-structured interviews (Cox et al., 2020). Interviews are video, audio, or text recorded and transcribed with participant approval.

For participants who choose an entirely written interview version, I provide a fillable form with questions, explanatory information, and idea prompts (Nicolaidis et al., 2020). This detailed questionnaire (Appendix D), like the intensive interview questions, changes over time as I systematically analyze each interview and target emerging conceptual categories.

Memo Writing

I employ the constructivist grounded theory method of reflective researcher memoing throughout data collection. After every interview and during each data analysis cycle, I collect my thoughts by writing memos (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). I consider memos as data, and I write my memos on paper and directly in the Atlas.ti software. I transfer paper notes to Atlas.ti for inclusion in data analysis.

Transcription

I process the recordings from each interview, which do not include participant names, using Zoom's transcription feature provided by otter.ai, a third-party transcription service that uses artificial intelligence. After processing, I generate a Word file identified with the participant's pseudonym that I save in password-protected and encrypted cloud storage. I also upload the transcript file to the Atlas.ti software. I review the transcripts to check for accuracy, mark inaudible sections or other breaks, and de-identify them as needed.

Data Analysis

I employ data analysis procedures consistent with the constructivist grounded theory approach recommended by Charmaz (2014). The procedures are structured but flexible, allowing concepts to emerge from the data inductively. This method of analysis is also iterative, and it is this iterative nature that allows the researcher to co-create a model with the participants (Charmaz, 2008). Through theoretical sampling, data collection and analysis happen simultaneously (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I use themes and abstract categories that emerge from early interviews to develop questions and areas of inquiry for subsequent interviews. As I complete the analysis of each new interview, I apply the constant comparative method. Aptly named, this analysis method requires constantly comparing the data collected to the existing themes and codes. New interviews expand on these themes and codes and probe to locate undiscovered themes. This iterative data collection, analysis, and adjustment process continues until no new themes emerge and existing codes are saturated. By evaluating the codes, categories, and themes and their relationships to each other, I create a theoretical model of the process under study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Coding

Phase One

As data is collected, I code line-by-line within the Atlas.ti software using in vivo coding processes. In vivo coding is a process that uses the actual words of the participants to create codes, which can lead to emergent categories (Saldaña, 2021). In vivo coding is particularly useful given my conceptual framework, as it preserves and prioritizes participants' voices. In vivo coding also helps to ensconce participant meaning directly within the code. In this phase, I also record any initial or open codes that emerge during the in vivo coding process. I record initial codes within Atlas.ti and as part of the memo-writing process (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021).

Phase Two

I perform a second, focused coding of the coded interview data and my researcher memos to generate provisional conceptual categories (Charmaz, 2014). Focused coding creates categories disregarding their detailed properties (Saldaña, 2021). These are codes that appear more frequently during phase one coding. In this phase, I select codes from phase one that make the most logical sense (Charmaz, 2014). Focused codes advance theoretical work and allow me to adjust my interview guide to target emerging conceptual categories to learn more about them.

Phase Three

I conduct additional interviews using theoretical sampling with modified and new questions to target emerging theories. This cycle ensures that I am saturating categories, evaluating relationships between categories, checking them for fit and outliers, and performing member checking with prior participants (Charmaz, 2014). I perform the first two coding phases

on the new intensive interview data and researcher memos. During this process, I use the constant comparative method to make comparisons at each analysis stage.

Phase Four

I perform theoretical coding using the entirety of the coded data to theorize about the existence of a central category. The member-checking interviews provide insight into the emerging categories and connections and inform the theoretical coding process. Theoretical coding is a level of coding that conceptualizes how the categories and codes may relate to each other to explain the process or phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical coding is an essential part of constructivist grounded theory analysis methods that increases levels of abstraction within the data to help develop a model, framework, or substantive theory. Using theoretical coding, I explore the potential of a model or framework to conceptually explain how autistic first-year college students form support networks and the facilitators and barriers to experiencing meaningful support. The theoretical coding stage also allows me to check for theoretical saturation. I verify and test the categories created after phase two coding to determine if new data aligns with the categories and that the new data reflects the same patterns and connections between categories (Charmaz, 2014).

The results of this phase are substantive theory. Unlike formal sociological theory, constructivist grounded theory methods achieve a theoretical interpretation or explanation of a problem or phenomenon grounded in the empirical data (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014). I create a model, framework, or conceptual guide to describe my interpretation of how autistic students form academic and social support networks. This interpretation is co-constructed with participants and may be provisional (Saldaña, 2021).

Trustworthiness and Credibility

This study uses constructivist grounded theory methods with a conceptual framework in disability studies and the neurodiversity paradigm. My research flows from an interpretive paradigm, and, as such, the positivist criteria related to validity are not applicable (Morrow, 2005). I use several strategies to enhance my study's trustworthiness and credibility, the qualitative equivalent of validation:

- Empirical checks – the process of theoretical sampling and the constant comparative method of constructivist grounded theory are a form of verification (Bryant, 2017). I verify data internally against the emerging categories throughout the data collection and analysis process, and I also verify the emerging model using new data from the second interview phase.
- Member-checking – The second interview phase engages participants in reviewing my emergent categories and theories. This process allows me to construct data with the active engagement of participants to check my interpretation and inform analysis (Charmaz, 2014).
- Memo-writing – The reflexive action of memo writing through every phase of data collection and analysis encourages the identification of potential biases. It increases my awareness of my position as researcher within my research, including my interpretations and actions (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021).

Data Management and Confidentiality

Research records identifying participants are confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available without participant permission. I inform participants that there may be circumstances where this information must be

released or shared as required by law. Northern Arizona University Institutional Review Board may monitor the research records.

I will take the following measures to protect the confidentiality of the study records and data:

- I will not share any identifying information about participants or their interviews with anyone at any time.
- Participants are assigned or choose a pseudonym and study code number for use in transcripts and all documents, publications, and presentations.
- Participants' real names are not used and are known only to me.
- I am not accessing or requesting protected health information (PHI). Participants self-identify as autistic.
- I keep the list connecting participant names to pseudonyms and codes in an encrypted and password-protected file in cloud storage. Only I have access to the file.
- I secure participants' email addresses for receiving interview confirmation, informed consent forms, and gift card(s) with the list of real names.
- All correspondence is saved separately from any study data on a password-secured email server or encrypted and password-protected cloud storage.
- I will destroy the list when the data are analyzed and the study is complete.
- With participant permission, I record each interview to prepare an accurate transcript. Zoom's password-protected and encrypted cloud recording feature secures the recording.
- After making the transcript and verifying its accuracy, I erase the recordings. Participants' real names are not in the transcripts or my notes.
- I save interview data (e.g., audio, transcripts) using pseudonyms or study code numbers.

- I store interview data on a secured server accessible only to me via password-protected computers.
- Because of the nature of the data, there is a very small risk that someone could deduce participant identity; however, I make every attempt to prevent this and to report participant data in a way that is not identifiable.

I inform participants that I may share information about them collected for this study with other researchers, and they or I may also use it for other research studies. These studies may be similar to this study or completely different. I will ensure that participant identity cannot be linked to the information I share, but I will not ask participants for additional permission before sharing the information. The data will be kept for ten years and then destroyed.

Summary

This chapter details my research methodology, approach, and procedures to explore autistic first-year students' processes to create academic and social support networks during their first-year transition. The study aims to understand autistic students' first-year transition to college through their voices and to take a strengths-based look at how autistic students use social and academic support networks to navigate this experience. In conducting this qualitative study using a constructivist grounded theory approach, I seek to develop a model of autistic first-year students' processes to create academic and social support networks grounded in their lived experiences. A constructivist grounded theory approach guides my research procedures. I collect data through intensive interviews using iterative strategies sensitive to my population's needs. The constant comparative strategy central to the constructivist grounded theory approach guides my data analysis. Through this iterative and flexible process, I generate findings that reflect appropriate levels of credibility and trustworthiness.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

I was on the, like, executive board for [student club]. I did that a lot. So there was like the few people that also did that a lot that I got to know. But, like, a lot of times it would bother me 'cuz, like, I knew they would all hang out when they're not there. I didn't know if it was like, 'I'm here and they don't like me, I should leave,' or 'I'm here, they would like me to go, and I'm just not understanding how to invite myself or ask them what they're doing.' – Lucas

This study explores the lived experiences of autistic college students to understand how they manage the development, growth, and maintenance of academic and social support networks and to understand the facilitators and barriers to their experience of effective and meaningful support. I use a grounded theory methodological perspective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2008, 2014) to collect and analyze data. I apply these methods within a disability studies and neurodiversity paradigm conceptual framework. The resulting analysis culminates in a model or theory grounded in data that could help faculty, staff, and administrators better support autistic students. I interviewed 13 college students from four universities in the U.S. West using Charmaz's (2014) intensive interviewing framework. In their interviews, Cassia, Charis, Seneca, Granola, Laelia, Lucas, Mack, Rei, Rinus, Sirius, Taylor, Valeria, and Willow reflected on and described with depth, maturity, and clarity their experiences of support during their first year of college. Together we examined the emerging theory of a core process affecting support connections, along with facilitators and barriers to support at the social, academic, and university club or organization levels.

In this chapter, I begin by detailing the story of the interviews, from finding participants to gathering data, as well as participant characteristics and brief vignettes. Next, I discuss the

iterative data collection, analysis, and adjustment process and constructivist grounded theory methods of analysis used to co-create theoretical models. Emerging from the data is a core theoretical process of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting. This core theoretical process occurs at varying degrees and with different effects across all social interactions and is congruent with existing double empathy problem theory (Milton, 2012), research on autistic social anxiety and adaptive morphing, most commonly called masking by participants (Black et al., 2023; Lawson, 2020), and Boldsen's (2022) finding that environment and material objects are important to autistic social interaction.

The university serves as a context for this core process of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting. I explain how participants view the university and its setting as an unseen actor in building academic and social support networks. Within the university context, I detail the theoretical process models for building social support, academic support, and support from university clubs and organizations, including how the core process of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting creates and interacts with barriers and facilitators to building support networks. In detailing my analysis and findings, I use participants' words to ground theory in data. To conclude, I connect these findings to my research questions.

Finding and Hearing Autistic Voices

The words and thoughts of autistic first-year students are essential to understanding the lived experience of autistic first-year college students. Finding participants for my study was challenging given the small population of autistic first-year college students relative to non-autistic first-year students, and I anticipated the challenge. Throughout recruitment, I made several minor adjustments to make the interview process more accessible, meet the stated needs

of autistic participants, and gather perspectives on the first-year experience from students who had the benefit of time and distance from that experience.

Finding Participants

During recruitment, I discovered that some participants needed a fully written version of the interview to participate. After researching effective methods to gather interview-style data in written form and methods to best structure questionnaires for autistic participants, I created a written version with questions, explanatory information, and idea prompts (Nicolaidis et al., 2020). This detailed questionnaire, like the intensive interview questions, changed over time as I systematically analyzed each interview and targeted emerging conceptual categories. I interviewed four of my thirteen participants using the detailed questionnaire format. This format enriched my findings as these four participants felt more comfortable and could respond over time, giving it more thought and reflection.

I initially limited recruitment to a specific set of first-time, full-time, first-year autistic students at a four-year college or university. During recruitment, a current graduate student contacted me and was very interested in sharing his past experiences as a first-year college student, particularly as they compare to his recent experiences as a graduate student. Interviewing Lucas, I discovered that students' perspectives beyond the first year gave me the depth of understanding necessary to contextualize the first-year experience. Often, we cannot process our experiences as they happen; hindsight allows for a richer understanding of the experience. Three of the thirteen study participants were past their first year of college, with one graduate student, one 2nd-year student, and one 4th-year student reflecting on their experiences. All participants attend large R1 or R2 universities. The Participant Characteristics Summary (Table 1) lists the participants and provides basic information on each.

Participant Characteristics Summary

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Name	Univ.	Year	Diagnosis	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	LGBTQIA Status	Living Situation
Cassia	Canyon	1 st	Self/ Therapist	Female	White	Bisexual	Dorm
Charis	Canyon	1 st	Medical	Female	White	Lesbian	Dorm
Seneca	Mesquite	1 st	Medical	Non- Binary	White/ Hispanic	Bisexual	Home
Granola	Mesquite	2 nd	Self/ Therapist	Not Stated	White	Lesbian	Dorm/ Apt.
Laelia	Mesquite	1 st	Self	Non- Binary	Mexican	Lesbian	Dorm
Lucas	Mesquite	Grad Student	Medical	Male	White/ Hispanic	Not Stated	Dorm/ Apt.
Mack	Mesquite	1 st	Medical	Female/ Non- Binary	White/ Jewish	Queer	Dorm
Rei	Mesquite	1 st	Not Provided	Female	White/ Asian	Bisexual	Dorm
Rinus	Pacific	1 st	Medical	Male	White	Queer	Dorm
Sirius	Canyon	1 st	Self	Trans Male	White	Queer/Ace	Dorm
Taylor	Canyon	1 st	Not Provided	Female	White	Questioning / Queer	Dorm
Valeria	Mesquite	1 st	Medical	Female	Hispanic/ Latina	Questioning	Home
Willow	Cholla	4 th	Medical	Trans Female	White/ Latina/ Jewish	Lesbian	Dorm/ Apt.

Participant Vignettes

Each participant shared unique perspectives and experiences informed by their background and individual circumstances. These short vignettes provide a more profound understanding of each participant and respect for their individuality. I offered all participants the opportunity to select their pseudonyms, and I selected pseudonyms for participants who had no preference. After several participants selected names of Roman origin, I chose future pseudonyms with the same origin. One chosen pseudonym was changed to reduce confusion. While most participants were white, the racial and ethnic diversity represents their university communities, with a majority identifying as Hispanic, Mexican, or Latina.

Cassia

As a first-year student at Canyon University, Cassia chose her university to provide a new start with a little distance from her home in another state. As she "didn't really have a whole lot of friends in high school" and "wanted to get away from that crowd," Canyon was a good choice. Cassia is self-diagnosed with autism after working with a therapist, working in a school setting with autistic children, and performing research. She has changed majors in her first semester, is currently exploring a few options for a potential career, and is "trying to be okay with not knowing." Cassia receives extensive support from her mom and boyfriend and has had a positive experience in her first semester of college.

Charis

Like Cassia, Charis selected Canyon University for being "the farthest away from home I can get while still being in-state." Noting, "I've got that distance, so I can do my own thing." Her mother took her for medical diagnosis early because she "was kind of like, a weird kid...and [she] had interests that were like, a little bit strange." She thinks she likes being autistic because

her family and friends are supportive and accepting. For Cassia, Canyon is also a fresh start where she has challenged herself to "be more social...to talk to people, because it's a little bit difficult for [her] to make friends sometimes." While she has heard some people on campus use autistic as an insult and is bored with her general education classes, her first semester is going well. Charis has support from three main groups of friends at school: her roommate, two friends she met at a university welcome event, and a group she met in a small seminar class.

Seneca

Attending a satellite campus of Mesquite University as a first-year student, Seneca wanted to avoid living in a dorm and selected Mesquite because the campus is convenient, and the majors offered focus on STEM topics they find interesting. Medically diagnosed with autism early on, they [chosen pronoun] felt they were not "self-sufficient enough to actually, like, live in the dorms." Having a meltdown on the first day, feeling like classes are monotonous, and disliking the overall structure of college has made them feel that "the college structure as a whole isn't exactly the greatest for autistic people." Despite feeling that college is not designed for autistic people, Seneca is doing well academically and intends to continue. They have support from a parent who works at their campus of Mesquite University, other family members, and an extensive online group of friends.

Granola

Granola is technically a second-year student but is only in her second full semester of classes. Attending Mesquite University starting in the fall of 2021, a severe medical emergency requiring surgery forced her to withdraw from classes at the start of spring 2022. Feeling different since she was thirteen, "in high school, [she] didn't have any friends." Coming to understand more about autism, when Granola started therapy after her disabling medical issue,

her therapist confirmed her self-diagnosis. Granola has no desire for a medical diagnosis because “it's very obvious to [her] that [she's] autistic.” She likes being autistic because it is a part of her that “makes [her] funny and interesting.” Granola is connecting better with people after treating a comorbid condition. Compared to an isolated experience in her first semester, Granola now has support from friends she met through the relationship app Bumble BFF. Granola also has a long-time group of online friends who know much about her personal life and provide tremendous emotional support.

Laelia

For Laelia, a first-year student at Mesquite University, being autistic is an integral part of their identity as “it brings [them] to answers” as to why they have “always known [they] were different from other kids, but never knew why.” Self-diagnosed after talking about these feelings with an autistic friend and doing research, Laelia has felt isolated by being perceived as “weird” since they were a child. Laelia has always wanted to attend Mesquite but is unsure what career and major they should choose. They “came on campus scared and unprepared” and feel that college has been much more challenging than they thought. Laelia has made friends in classes at Mesquite and has close online friends, including an older friend who serves as a mentor.

Lucas

Lucas is a Ph.D. student at Mesquite University and earned an on-ground bachelor's degree and an online master's degree from the university. Providing a unique perspective as an older student returning to college full-time and as someone medically diagnosed with autism just a few years ago, Lucas looks back at his first year in college with new eyes. When he was 27, someone in an internet chat commented that Lucas's experiences were similar to someone with Asperger's. Like many self-diagnosed participants, this prompted him to research and determine

that the autism diagnosis fit. Lucas had to pursue a diagnosis with persistence and felt like it was a "goose chase" even to get tested. Now he feels the diagnosis has "just been like a big relief.... I always thought real negatively of myself and would like get really down on myself and beat myself up for it and just question, 'what's wrong with me?'" Now in a Ph.D. program, Lucas has found more effective ways to build a support network with his advisor and cohort.

Mack

As a first-year student at Mesquite University, Mack likes to make people aware that she is autistic. She "mask[s] very well, so [she doesn't] think they would know if [she] didn't tell them, but it's still important to [her] that they know." The detailed questionnaire is unclear if Mack is medically diagnosed. One of Mack's most significant challenges at Mesquite is finding the energy required to perform constant masking. Masking depletes her energy, and she is too exhausted to perform care tasks, maintain a typical course load, or engage needed support from counseling and disability services. Mack has a robust social network with two best friends, some friends from high school, friends her roommates introduced her to, and a friend met through Bumble BFF; most of her meaningful social activities occur online.

Rei

Rei does not feel her autism is an important part of her identity. As a first-year student at Mesquite University, her identities as an artist and bisexual come first. She has a boyfriend and family support and feels her classes are going well. Most of her social activities occur online, but she recently attended an event at Mesquite.

Rinus

At the start of his interview, Rinus was concerned that he "might not be the right person for this study, just 'cause, I guess, [autism] hasn't really negatively impacted [his] life that much."

However, Rinus does think autism changes how he experiences life and sees the world. A first-year student at Pacific University, Rinus has a distinct way of viewing his support network, each part serving a defined function. Rinus had high expectations for building new social connections in college and invested time and effort into finding friends quickly. A cohort model within his major helped him find that group. He eats dinner, goes to museums, and watches movies with his new friends regularly.

Sirius

COVID has been a barrier to Sirius receiving an autism diagnosis, but having diagnosed siblings and doing a lot of research has led him to self-diagnosis. Sirius is a first-year student at Canyon University who feels that autism affects every facet of his life. He feels that "it would be much easier to be proud of being autistic if the world was built in a way that was more supporting of neurodivergent people." Sirius's parents are providing more academic and social support now that he is in college, and he also relies heavily on his roommate to facilitate social interactions. He indicated that he did not have many friends early in the interview, but in the end, Sirius realized that he had more friends than he was giving himself credit for, and he smiled.

Taylor

Like other participants, Taylor chose Canyon University because it is still in-state but is a comfortable distance from her family home. A first-year student, Taylor feels that "autism is seen as a handicap, and [she doesn't] want to tell people she has a handicap because they will probably think differently of [her]." Taylor did not discuss diagnosis in her questionnaire responses. Taylor "accidentally walked into a huge group of friends during [her] first week" and joined a sorority. Classes requiring abstract thinking challenge Taylor, and she struggles to find a romantic life at Canyon University.

Valeria

Valeria is a first-year student living at home and commuting to Mesquite University. While Valeria received a medical diagnosis of autism at five, she did not find out until she was twelve when a primary care doctor mentioned autism in her medical file. Her mom explained autism as a mental illness; that is how Valeria sees autism today. Valeria receives most of her support from her family but feels somewhat restricted by their opinions and rules. She has a few friends from high school that she spends time with occasionally and has two out-of-state friends she contacts. Despite being challenged with commuting, walking, and living at home, Valeria feels her first semester has been a positive learning experience.

Willow

Like Lucas, Willow is a few years removed from being a first-year student at Cholla University. She has seen some struggle, dropping out three times over four years. Medically diagnosed at a four or five, there was a point in her K12 years that she was masking so well that the diagnosis was removed and no longer accommodated. During her first year at Cholla, Willow was very anxious about making friends and keeping up with classes and felt like it might have been a self-fulfilling prophecy. Last summer, Willow sought treatment for comorbid conditions and came out as transgender. Since those steps forward, she has had a much more positive outlook. Willow has support from her mom, her roommate, a college best friend, a high school best friend, and a religious/cultural affinity group. Willow is very busy with time commitments to in-person and online communities and activities.

Applying Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods to Data Collection and Analysis

In this section, I provide detail on my data analysis process. Because grounded theory is an iterative process using the constant comparative method to refine and member-check emerging theory, I provide more specific detail on the analysis process than might be typical to ensure transparency and validity.

I conducted initial coding on the first three interviews to create simple and provisional codes. I performed empirical checking whenever I reviewed interviews and compared them to emerging concepts, categories, and theories (Bryant, 2017). As I entered the final stages of theoretical coding, I used a diagramming approach Charmaz (2014) suggests to visually represent the categories and their relationships. Through diagramming, I theorized around a core process participants described in their social interactions. I identified that the codes “analyzing,” “self-judging,” and “adapting” were occurring recursively during social interactions. Participants also connected this process to resulting feelings of anxiety and stress. I used the final two interviews and a detailed questionnaire response to affirm theoretical plausibility.

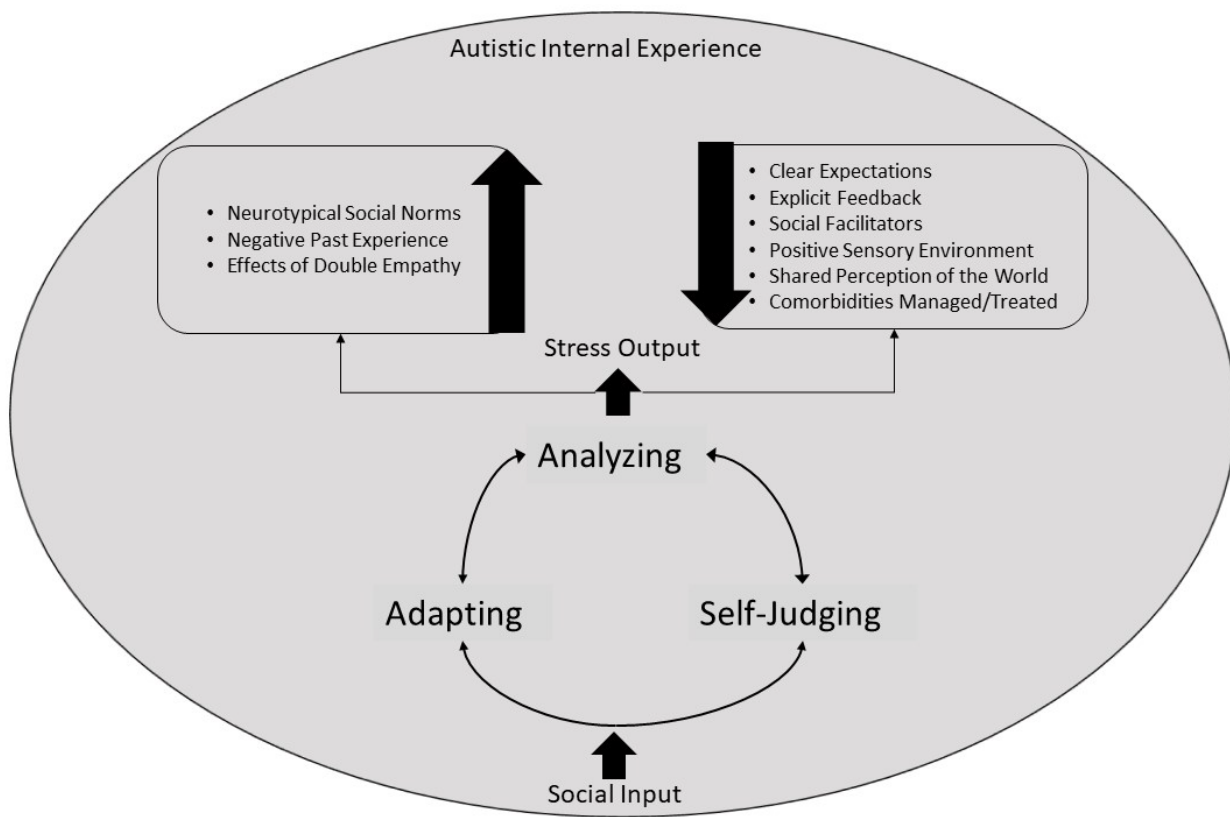
As I reviewed interviews and memos and organized the data into an emergent theory, I discussed this theory with a member of my dissertation committee, Dr. Joshua Anbar. As an autism researcher who is also autistic, Dr. Anbar had unique insights and questions about the emerging theory. He also reflected that my initial theorizing generally fit with his lived experience. I continued to process the data and explicate the core processes involved; I also discussed my ideas with my autistic college-aged daughter. She provided insight into my thinking about the emerging theory and validated that it represented her lived experience. Both collaborators added ideas that I included in naming the emerging theory. The result is the substantive theory now presented.

Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting

This section describes the core theoretical process emerging from my data, Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting. I diagram this process in Figure 1 to display how the three main categories of analyzing, self-judging, and adapting interact as participants experience social situations. The result of this interaction is increased stress which can be increased or reduced based on the conditions of the interaction. Using participants' words to describe and give voice to the emerging theory, I will ground the theory in the data. Because I use constructivist grounded theory methods, I describe the iterative data collection and analysis process as it unfolded using increased detail for transparency.

Figure 1

Model of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting



Shared Perception of the World

Humans are naturally social and seek community or connection with other humans to share their happiness, struggles, and thoughts. Starting with my interview with Rinus, participants shared that they expected college to be a new start, a time to push forward, be different from their past selves, and make new friends. Some found a connection immediately, and others repeatedly tried without much success. Rinus found a group of friends on the first day in a cohort of students in his major:

I had three classes on Monday. So like, class number one, people just sat wherever. Class number two, I saw like a cool person in the back of the class and I was like, ‘Oh, I should sit next to them ‘cuz they're dressed kind of goth and that's always a good sign.’ And I, like, introduced myself, that kind of thing. Class number three, we were all just sort, I sort of, or like, you probably are aware of this, but like people who are sort of queer and autistic tend to congregate together and like seek each other out. So like, just as I had in class number two, I saw a person who looked kind of goth and immediately like tried to sit next to them. Other people had also done that, so we sort of ended up like sitting in the same row. And then, when the class ended, someone was like, ‘Hey, let's all get dinner together.’ And everyone else was like, ‘Okay, sure.’

In a seemingly familiar setting and situation for first-year students, Sirius provided some initial clues about how the autistic experience of finding social connections might differ. Sirius later described how he intentionally put himself out there and worked hard to find and make friends that first week. His comment that queer and autistic people tend to find each other felt significant. Aside from visual cues like “looking goth,” how and why did other autistic students

seek each other out? Is seeking out friends from communities of people who frequently feel othered common?

Significant to answering the question of what type of friends my participants are seeking is the statistical overlap between the autistic and LGBTQIA+ communities. Autistic people are more likely to identify their sexual orientation as non-heterosexual and have a greater diversity in gender identification than the general population (Sala et al., 2020). In my study, 12 of the 13 participants identified as LGBTQIA+, with some additionally identifying as transgender, non-binary, or abinary, coinciding with a diversity in both sexual orientation and gender identification. Research has not determined a cause for this heightened representation of autistic people within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Also central to understanding how participants identified potential friends and “more chill” residence assistants, faculty, and staff is the concept of vibing. Nearly every participant used the term vibing when describing an easier, more comfortable, less stressful, and positive social interaction or relationship. Sirius describes vibing as:

Like trying to fit puzzle pieces together, like when you're in this conversation with them if the words are flowing easily, and you're bouncing off of each other, instead of words flowing and then being stopped like a brick wall.

Participants also applied the words vibes and vibing to spaces with similar meaning. Vibing with a space meant you felt welcome, comfortable, and had a sense of belonging in that space. Vibing was very important to participants' feelings of safety and trust, and many felt that vibing allowed them to feel less stress and that they could mask their autism less frequently.

After my interview with Rinus, I began asking more questions about how participants find potential people to connect with socially. The concepts of “looking for those that were like

them” or “different from typical” kept returning. When talking with participants about finding people they were like or that they vibed with, there was not much separation between feeling alike because of a shared identity as autistic, neurodivergent, queer, transgender, or any singular identity. Feelings of being alike may come from shared feelings and experiences of being marginalized or othered. It may also be because autistic people tend to have more than one identity that falls in the category of marginalized or othered. In both cases, identifying as part of a marginalized identity or feeling a shared experience as part of similarly marginalized groups, a similar life experience, and a shared perception of the world were important to participants when looking for potential friends.

Interestingly, for several participants, knowing a potential friend’s status as a member of a preferred group is as much an explicit requirement as a natural affinity. Two participants called out their use of Bumble BFF, a choice in the Bumble dating app to look for friends rather than romantic partners. Granola noted, “I met all of my current friends through dating apps because they’re like, ‘Hey, I’m queer, and I’m autistic.’ I’m like, ‘Oh my God, me too! We are besties now!’” Knowing upfront that they share a similar perception of the world reduces anxiety or stress about being able to vibe, and apps like Bumble BFF help to facilitate those connections.

For other participants, shared identities or socializing with someone from a similarly marginalized identity was a good indicator of vibing, but other underlying factors that signaled a shared perception of the world were as or more important. As Mack explains:

I guess I feel a little more relaxed around other queer people, but not that much. I am noticeably more relaxed around other autistic people, but it depends on the situation. One of my friend's close friends is also autistic, and I see him pretty often, but interacting with him is very confusing for me. I think he's nice and I like him in general, but I can't read

him at all and I barely understand what he's saying, so I don't feel particularly relaxed around him. I feel most comfortable around people that are understanding and non-judgemental, and people that have the same sense of humor as me. I also feel very comfortable around people with the same interests as me, so we can talk about things that actually interest both of us instead of just listening to each other speak.

While having shared experiences as being othered or marginalized may indicate having a shared perception of the world, Mack's experiences suggest that many things may comprise that shared perception. While individual commonalities may reduce stress from or during a social situation, no one thing or combination of things will accurately predict that two people will vibe.

Understanding that vibing with people was essential to participants' feelings of comfort, reduced stress, and the lowering of masking, I wanted to understand if other situations, places, or experiences also reduced their experiences of stress. Again, participant responses turned to vibes and how specific environments, places, and spaces with the right vibe helped them feel more physically comfortable and helped to make social interactions in those spaces less stressful.

Positive Sensory Environment

Autistic people can be both hypo- and hyper-sensitive to their surrounding sensory environment (Marco et al., 2011). In her first-person account, Temple Grandin (2008) describes building a squeeze machine in college to help reduce stress through increased pressure or sensory input. Later research by Boldsen (2022) shows that the environment is critical when autistic people interact. A positive environment, whatever that means for the individual, helps to support and sustain interaction.

As Valeria described a place on campus where she feels most comfortable, I saw this category connecting with reduced stress and increased comfort; the nested codes related to the

participants' physical and emotional experiences in those spaces. Valeria explains that her feelings of comfort come from being in a space aligned with her interests—one that creates a sense of belonging:

Like, and I just, I don't know, the general vibe felt right. The general art classroom felt right to me because in my old school, there wasn't a lot of art students, and I kind of felt like I stuck out a little bit.

For Willow, comfort comes in a space that aligns with her religious culture, a student center housed on campus. For Seneca, their most comfortable space has physical privacy, low noise, and is one where they have control over the space.

Dorm rooms may be one of the most common spaces where students in the study felt most comfortable, specifically because they had more control over sensory input. Taylor explains:

I feel most comfortable in my dorm room because I do not have to interact with anyone besides my roommate. While I enjoy having a social life, it can be overwhelming, and coming back to my dorm allows me to relax and recharge my social battery.

Charis lamented that she does not have a door to close in her dorm and feels some stress, even when taking a nap during the day, because her roommate could walk in at any time.

Participants described the comfort they felt in positive sensory environments and made a direct connection between that comfort and their ability to, as Taylor said, manage their “social battery.” Rinus described how a space designated for students in his major helped him interact socially by engaging in a special interest with others. Lucas’ positive social experience in the lounge for graduate students in his program comes from the clear expectations for how they use

the space. It is a place where the students can control the lights and noise, and he never feels like he has to maintain typical social norms:

If I go in there, I sit down and I work for four hours and I leave. And there's a bunch of people in there working and I never talked to anyone. I don't ever feel like I've let other people down 'cuz I didn't measure up to the normal pleasantries and all that.

For Cassia, her comfortable space is where she can interact with her best friend without “worrying about upsetting a roommate” or “being loud.” It is a space where she doesn’t have to continually monitor herself for socially acceptable behaviors. For the participants in this study, comfortable spaces not only reduce stress, but they reduce stress related to and during social interactions.

Social Facilitators

As participants discussed their university experiences, they often talked about people in their life that made engaging in social interactions easier. For some people like Charis, their roommate reduces the anxiety that comes from having to meet new people. She commented, “It was very helpful that my roommate started the conversation, because otherwise I probably wouldn’t have started a conversation.” While Charis had noticed the girl with the Harry Potter necklace and wanted to get to know her, it would have been too stressful to do on her own. Rinus had a new acquaintance ask him to go to the gym. Rinus texted a friend to ask what you do at the gym so he could know how to behave during the social interaction. In each case, having another trusted person to help facilitate social interactions made participants less stressed during the interaction.

Explicit Feedback

Several participants expressed that feeling unsure about other people's reactions in social situations caused stress and worry. When navigating an interaction, receiving explicit feedback about that person's thoughts and feelings decreased that worry. Mack appreciates knowing explicitly what other people want, even though she might negatively react to it. She said, "I find it very helpful when people tell me directly that they're not interested in talking or hanging out, because I might not pick up on it otherwise, but I still take it very personally even when they're just busy." Not only does explicit feedback reduce the worry that they might have missed a social cue, but it also helps participants gauge whether they are meeting dominant social norms, as Sirius explains:

When I say I like reactions out of people, I specifically look towards these reactions to gauge whether what I'm saying is socially appropriate and whether they're validating it. That's why people leaving me on read is very upsetting to me, because it's like, 'Hey, I can't gauge a social reaction from this!'"

Receiving explicit feedback from friends, faculty, residence hall staff, and even a group text all helped participants feel less worried about themselves and their behaviors during social situations.

Comorbidities Managed/Treated

While a medicalized view of autism does not align with the conceptual framework of the study or my perspective as a researcher, comorbid conditions are a part of the embodied reality of most autistic people. Conditions such as Ehlers-Danlos that cause hypermobility affect autistic people at a higher rate and can cause injuries, such as those experienced by Granola and Sirius (Casanova et al., 2020). Participants reported diagnoses of ADHD, depression, and anxiety. On

their own, these issues are essential to managing overall well-being. However, in several instances, participants noted that getting medication and therapy for other diagnoses helped them have more energy and capability for social interaction. Willow noted that this last summer, she got treatment for her anxiety and depression and came out as transgender. She ties this directly to helping her be more relaxed and open to friendships:

It was a very eventful summer but I think the reason I have so many more friends now is that I came out of the closet in July, and that's been I don't know, I've heard it said that by some people in my circles, that maybe I'm just making more friends because my vibe is a lot more open. I don't seem so guarded, and I think that's probably true.

Granola described a similar change in herself after getting treatment for depression. She felt worried and had an increased capacity to socialize. Several participants acknowledged that some of their other diagnosed conditions were causing them to not feel as capable of social interaction.

Analyzing the data, I could see that these five codes fit under a larger category of “reducing stress from or during social situations.” Having a shared perception of the world with someone, being in a positive sensory environment, having access to people who serve as social facilitators, receiving explicit feedback from other people in the social interaction, and having the ability, access, and privilege to manage comorbid disabilities or diagnoses each potentially contributed to participants’ feeling reduced stress. To complete my analysis, I needed to return to the data to see if there were codes that fit into a potential category of “elements that increase stress from or during social situations.”

Effects of Double Empathy

When exploring elements that lowered levels of stress, anxiety, and worry for participants during social interactions, I also began to tailor questions to elicit responses about social

interactions that were more stressful. Responses indicated that higher stress came from interactions with allistic people. As Laelia notes, “interacting with allistic people is tricky. It either goes very badly, awkward, or okay. It’s isolating being treated and perceived as weird and such because of something I have almost no control over.”

The double empathy problem is the theory that two people who experience the world differently struggle to empathize, understand, and connect. This struggle is experienced differently by autistic and allistic participants in a social encounter (Milton, 2012). It is similar to if a native English speaker with no knowledge of Japanese travels to Japan to talk with someone who only knows Japanese. The challenges occur for both participants in the social interaction and are more profound than language; however, for autistic/allistic engagements, the problem has historically been perceived as resulting from the autistic person's inadequate social skills, ability to communicate, and theory of mind deficits (Baron-Cohen, 1991, 2009). Laelia gives voice to an experience many participants discussed, feeling as though they were the only one in an autistic/allistic interaction who was “weird,” flawed, or wrong. Many participants indicated that these feelings existed if they were interacting with an allistic person, an autistic person, or someone who perceives the world the same way they do; however, they expressed that certain conditions made those feelings of anxiety, worry, and stress greater.

Neurotypical Social Norms

When participants feel that neurotypical social norms are more present, enforced, or important, they analyze themselves and the situation more. Often, that co-occurred with greater negative self-judgment and higher levels of masking. As Mack notes, she mirrors friends to help align her behavior with dominant social norms:

I definitely am constantly analyzing social situations and I work very hard to socialize 'normally,' even around close friends. I usually let friends control how we socialize. Do we joke a lot, or say certain phrases often, or speak in a certain way? And I try to mirror them so they perceive me as normal. This is incredibly stressful, and it takes a lot of energy. I also try to read others' emotions when I'm speaking to them and watch for their reactions, so I know if I'm masking well enough or if there's something I need to change about the way I'm speaking.

For Rinus, those perceived dominant social norms help him avoid those situations. When talking about any negative pushback he has seen on campus towards autistic people, he noted:

I definitely get the impression that if I tried to go to like a frat party or something, I wouldn't be welcomed there. But then that's not really something I have any want, I really want to do, I guess.... Or like, I kind of feel like there's like autistic people are unwelcome in some spaces in college the same way they would be unwelcome in some spaces anywhere.

Rinus has internalized and accepted that there are places at the university where dominant social norms signal that autistic people are not welcome. In this case, the social norms preempt interaction. Many people likely have no interest in a fraternity party, but this tacit understanding goes beyond feeling unpopular or not enjoying the environment; being autistic goes against the grain. The more significant presence of dominant social norms causes a greater need to mask, which drains social reserves.

Negative Past Experience

Some of these perceptions of dominant social norms may come from media, but for many participants, these beliefs were born from past negative experiences with social interaction.

These negative past experiences feed the self-judgment participants engage in before, during, and after social interactions. Negative past experiences also affect how participants analyze an ongoing interaction as they compare it to past experiences and adjust their mask to compensate. For some participants, these negative past experiences happened well before college. Laelia describes consistent negative experiences growing up:

My family has had traditional [redacted] values/practices around autism, mental disorders, and trauma. They believe that anything can be fixed with beatings/punishments or medicine, and anything out of line that they perceive as weird or unnatural must be dealt with or silenced as to not hurt the family reputation. I've been treated harshly as a result and I still deal with the repercussions today.

Valeria grew up at first not knowing she was autistic and then believing that autism was a mental illness. Negative past experiences with bullying by her cousins made her more susceptible to accepting a bad friendship:

Ever since I was like, the youngest, right, I got bullied. So, um, so that's what you get for being the youngest and mentally ill. Because like, I don't think I was bullied much at home, like not at school, like elementary school or middle school. Like maybe I was just ignored like, 'What's the deal with her?' And then like, I got into a bad friendship. I think maybe it was like because like I was just like in the background, right, the third wheel.

Those bad past experiences caused two participants to hide their autism from others, hoping that masking would keep their secret. Both the codes of “following neurotypical social norms” and “negative past experiences” linked to comments about more significant worry, anxiety, and stress surrounding present social interactions and, in some cases, led participants to opt out of certain social interactions altogether. As I looked at this experience of stress resulting from social

interaction, three codes stood out as a connected, core experience common to all but two participants who completed the questionnaire before I started targeting the focused codes. The core process of “analyzing,” “self-judging,” and “adjusting” appeared to be significant causes of social stress in participants’ interactions. The codes identified as decreasing and increasing this stress affected this core process.

Analyzing, Self-Judging, and Adjusting

As I entered the final stages of theoretical coding, returning to the data and conducting member-checking with the last 3 participants, I began using diagrams to understand better how the codes of “analyzing,” “self-judging,” and “adjusting” connected and interacted. In this process, I adjusted the names of codes to fit the data better and align with the grounded theory suggested practice to select gerunds for these theoretical codes; gerunds are verbs ending in -ing used as nouns. From my diagrams and through discussion and brainstorming with friends and family who were patient enough to listen, I decided I could best represent the core process present in the data as Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting (Figure 1).

Because this process is recursive, it happens continuously during social interaction and not in a particular order; I visualized these codes as a wheel with bi-directional arrows to indicate this recursive nature. Within the quotes from participants that illustrate this process, each element of the process is intertwined, causing anxiety, worry, and stress during social interactions.

Earlier, Mack shared that she is “...constantly analyzing social situations...And I try to mirror them, so they perceive me as normal...I also try to read others' emotions when I'm speaking to them and watch for their reactions, so I know if I'm masking well enough.” The substantive theory I developed comes from a rich data set. Charis exemplifies how she

experiences the Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting process when she is in the dining hall alone and starts to feel “weird” and different:

I think sometimes it's because I'm alone. But also, I'll start to like analyze every little thing. Like, 'Oh, no, the design on my shirt, is that weird? Is it my hair cut? Is it like, is it the shoes I'm wearing? Is it the fact that my backpack is smaller than all the other kids' backpacks?' Or, just little things like that. If I'm not in a, if I don't have like a friend there, it's kind of like, I start to overthink. I frequently monitor social situations and I feel like I am very sensitive to people's reactions and stuff. And I've just, a lot of times, I really stress about whether or not the conversation is going in a good way.

Charis is continually analyzing other people’s reactions, judging herself against perceived norms, monitoring herself, and stressing about the outcome of social interactions.

Seneca’s reflection represents a potential negative case. While they do not discuss experiencing elements of the core process, they experience a typical result of having negative past experiences: opting out:

I just kind of go with the flow, I guess. Like I kind of see where conversations and such take us. Like, if I get bad vibes, I'll generally just be like, and try to just like, not really talk to them as much.

Seneca also indicated that they have opted out of looking for new social connections on campus because they already have a strong online social network. The potential benefits of university-based support may not be worth the anxiety and stress of getting lost looking for a club or interacting with new people.

Through these and other thoughts and experiences participants shared with me, I could hear how frequently they were analyzing situations, enacting self-judgment to ascertain if their

behavior meets what they perceive or have experienced to be the dominant social norms, and making adjustments by masking, scripting, stimming, or opting out altogether. Using constructivist grounded theory methods to analyze the wealth of data participants shared, the core theoretical process of Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting began to take form. At this point, I needed to return to the literature to see how my findings fit with existing research.

Double Empathy Problem Theory and Other Congruent Research

As I found connections and interactions between categories in my interview data leading me to consider the Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting process, I returned to the literature to see if any existing work matched or contradicted my findings. Milton's (2012) writing on the double empathy problem is congruent with the emerging theories I saw. Theories based on the double empathy problem challenge the idea that autistic participants in a cross-neurotype interaction are solely responsible for communication disconnect (Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2022). Instead, it is a breakdown in mutual understanding.

In Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting, autistic participants in a social interaction became stressed by the constant evaluation of their actions, scanning for reactions and validation, and adapting to the perceived needs of others while not fully understanding those needs because both people have fundamentally different perceptions of the world. This process has developed partially as a response to the constant signals that autistic people receive that they are the problem and bear the weight of adaptation to the neurotypical social standard. Some autistic people opt out of or avoid social interactions, and the resulting self-judging and adapting required, after years of receiving negative social feedback (Burrows et al., 2017). Instead, they may seek connections with people who have similar perceptions of the world, including other autistic and neurodivergent people and people from marginalized social groups.

Using the double empathy problem to view autistic and allistic social interaction aligns with a social model of disability and neurodiversity paradigm conceptual framework. Under the social model of disability and neurodiversity paradigm conceptual framework, neurodiversity is naturally occurring and may present challenges and strengths unique to the individual (Walker, 2014). Society and social norms may create or amplify the challenges (Baglieri et al., 2011). The double empathy problem assumes diversity and difference within the social interaction, not deficit. It also identifies dominant social norms as the cause of allistic and autistic experiences of that interaction.

The Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting process is consistent with the existing social psychology construct of self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974). The interpretation of social cues directs self-observation and self-control within the self-monitoring process. Using a deficit-focused model of autism, I might conclude that autistic people do not successfully self-monitor because they cannot interpret social cues (Baron-Cohen, 2009). Explaining the autistic experience of self-monitoring through a social model of disability and neurodiversity paradigm lens results in seeing the self-monitoring process as a shared experience where an unsuccessful result is due to dominant social norms being disabling.

Theories on the double empathy problem explain why the self-monitoring process of autistic people may differ from that of allistic people (Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2022). In this context, self-monitoring is directed by an interpretation of social cues that an autistic person does not have the code book to interpret. The allistic partner in the social interaction also lacks the code book to interpret the autistic partner. This may result in a small amount of stress for the allistic partner as they attempt to control their expressive behavior and adapt. However, the allistic person can label the autistic participant as ‘weird’ or ‘unusual’ and move on because

normative expectations align with their dominant social worldview (Heasman & Gillespie, 2018). Research using the double empathy problem model is consistent with earlier social psychological theories positing that people within a social in-group feel an increasing emotional connection with each other. At the same time, outsiders are subject to stereotyping and lower levels of emotional connection (Tajfel, 1981).

For the autistic partner in an allistic-autistic social interaction, there may be considerably more stress. Diagnosed social anxiety disorder is common among autistic adults, with social interactions being a significant source of anxiety (Black et al., 2023). In Black et al. (2023), the autistic participants' anxiety was reduced when a social interaction occurred in a positive sensory environment, had a conversation topic focused on their passions and interests, and occurred with an autistic partner. Anxiety was higher in autistic-allistic interactions as participants engaged in safety behaviors such as avoiding or escaping the interaction and masking or adjusting expressive behavior to hide their stress (Black et al., 2023).

Goffman (1955) describes the adjustment in expressive behavior during a social interaction as similar to a theatrical performance where an actor attempts to keep their performance acceptable and appropriate to their audience. Autistic people may experience increased levels of performance adjustment as they cover their uncertainty and hide it from their social partner, often described as camouflaging, morphing, or masking (Ai et al., 2022; Lawson, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2019). Masking was the only term consistently used by the participants in this study and is the term I use to describe the adjusting autistic people do in an attempt to cover or hide expressive behaviors counter to dominant social norms. Masking is detrimental to the long-term well-being of autistic people (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2021). However, it is often a result of the self-monitoring process. Self-monitoring may be more

stressful for autistic people as they are likelier than allistic people to be self-critical (Burrows et al., 2017) and perform repetitive thinking behaviors (Gotham & Williams, 2021).

Returning to the literature as I conducted theoretical sampling, I found that Milton's (2012, Milton et al., 2022) work and other social psychology literature enhanced my understanding of the concepts, categories, and emerging substantive theory I saw. The congruence of my data with this literature also helped to confirm theoretical plausibility. With a clearer understanding of the core process my participants described as they shared their support experiences as first-year students, I could now perform a more focused analysis of how that core process may operate for participants within the university context. As I looked for models to explain those processes, I also looked for codes that identified facilitators and barriers to social and academic support for participants.

The University as Context

The lack of a response during an interview is a response in itself, and I frequently received sparse responses when asking about the participants' university, including its programs and staff. When I asked Rinus how the university might better support him, he bluntly stated: "I don't really know, or like, I guess like mainly the thing my university does to support stuff is just like being a setting for those things to happen." Some participants did discuss interactions with the university, its staff, and faculty. Advisors were the most commonly mentioned university support person, with varying opinions of their effectiveness. Four participants also discussed residence hall staff. When asked if they would be interested in a university club or program for autistic people, only one participant indicated potential interest. One participant has a robust program at their university, and they felt it was too "academic" to be beneficial.

While the core process that emerged from my data did not seem to connect to or emanate from the university context, it does inform how students experience academic and social support on campus. As I analyzed the data to find codes, categories, and connections that might explain first-year college students' processes to build academic and social support networks, I discovered that the identified barriers and facilitators reflected the participants' experiences of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting. Additionally, as I began diagramming the processes participants used to build academic and social support networks, I discovered that I needed to describe separately the process related to finding support through university clubs or organizations. University clubs and organizations tended to provide academic and social support, and students employed a different process when building that part of their support network.

Support Networks in the University Context

For each area of the support network examined, social, academic, and university clubs or organizations, I used the data to create categories and connections between those categories to describe the process of developing support in that area (Figures 2, 3, and 4).

For each category, I looked for facilitators and barriers to that step in the process. Facilitators tended to reduce the stress associated with the Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting process, while barriers tended to increase feelings of stress, anxiety, or worry. Not every category produced relevant codes. For example, no participants described conditions facilitating “trusting” when building social support.

Building Social Support

Participants described the process of building social support as observing potential friends, testing out the potential of a relationship, forming a comfortable connection by vibing,

and ultimately trusting that support person. In Figure 2, I display the relationship between observing, testing, vibing, and trusting, describing the barriers and facilitators to these steps.

Figure 2

Theoretical Process Model for Building Social Support

	Observing	Testing	Vibing	Trusting
Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large existing friend group • Overwhelming life challenges • Isolation • Self-talk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worry/overthinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needing to mask 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worry about being too different
Facilitators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classes and events • Major or cohort groups • Expectations of college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roommates who facilitate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared perception of the world • Understanding • Acceptance 	

Observing

Observing is the process of locating a potential social support person. As Rinus described intentionally forcing himself to find friends in the first week of school, certain conditions facilitate participants taking the first steps toward looking for new social support at their university. Conversely, some conditions are barriers to participants starting that process. For Seneca, having a sizeable existing friend group means that they are less motivated to look for new social support in college:

Jennifer [after hearing that they didn't seem interested in making new connections]: So, actually, that's my follow-up question, are you interested in trying to make social kinds of connection with people in school?

Seneca: Not really, because honestly, I have so many online friends, so many like close connections with like my online friends and stuff that I feel like I've honestly got all the friends I could need.

While this may not be a barrier to Seneca as they are happy with their friend group, it is a barrier to the process step of finding friends at college and will be important to recommendations in Chapter 5.

Other barriers to having the desire or ability to start looking for social support are overwhelming life challenges that limit participants' time or capacity for finding new social connections, feeling or being physically isolated, and engaging in negative self-talk. Some additional facilitators to the observing step are spending time in university spaces like classes and events where there is an expectation of being social and the familiarity of major or cohort groups. For some participants, a desire or expectation for their new college life to be different from the past pushes them to put themselves in social situations that would not typically be comfortable so that they can find new social support.

Testing

Testing is the process of finding and initially engaging a potential social support person in college. Earlier, Charis described observing another girl with a Harry Potter necklace at a university welcome event. She wanted to interact with her, but it was her roommate facilitating the interaction that made it happen. What participants describe as a "vibe check" can be challenging to initiate with new people. For autistic participants, their experience of the Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting process can cause worry and overthinking that present a barrier to testing a potential new friendship.

Vibing

Vibing is connecting with a potential social support person comfortably. As Sirius described, it is a flow state where conversation happens more easily. For Granola, vibing is beyond the initial testing or "vibe check." By vibing with someone, they become "besties." As

Willow described, before she came out as transgender and could be more authentic, she could not make these deeper connections. The vibing “brick wall” that Sirius identified is a barrier that can be created by masking and feeling the need to continue masking with a potential long-term social support person. Conditions that reduce stress in the Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting process are facilitators at the vibing step, such as interacting with people with the same perception of the world. For Granola, queer people and autistic people often have this shared perception. Other participants identified experiences of understanding and acceptance from the other person facilitating vibing.

Trusting

Trusting is the final step in building a long-term mutually-supportive relationship. Trusting is where participants can lower their masking and feel more comfortable sharing challenges and asking for support. While other barriers and facilitators to this step may exist, the only common barrier shared was being worried about being too different. Rinus shared that one reason he has not begun to trust the new friend group he has found in college is that he is worried that if he begins to trust them and share some of the things he currently only shares with his high school friend group, they will no longer like him. He does feel like time will help with building that trust. Because so many participants were first-year students, it may be that time is a facilitator, and enough time has not passed.

Building Academic Support

When participants began to build academic support, the first step was to recognize they had a need, something they frequently described as difficult to do. As participants looked for academic support, they described an initial process of seeking support and, when conditions were right, the process of finding long-term academic support. In Figure 3 , I display the relationship

between the process steps of needing, seeking, and finding along with the barriers and facilitators to these steps.

Figure 3

Theoretical Process Model for Building Academic Support

	Needing	Seeking	Finding
Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not recognizing problems • Expecting college to be different • Uncertainty that questions are “normal” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unknown processes • Feeling vulnerable • Fear of asking for help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative feedback • Inconsistency • Help mismatch • Uncomfortable space • Having to ask
Facilitators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other people • External pressure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease of Access/Prominence • Other people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfortable/welcoming space • Staff who are welcoming • Staff who initiate help

Needing

Recognizing the need for academic support is the first step in building an academic support network. Many first-year participants indicated they did not need academic support besides their advisor. Charis remarked that she often does not recognize a problem until it becomes significant. Some participants with more college experience reflected that they had difficulty recognizing problems. Some participants did not seek help because high school teachers had told them that college would be different and help would not be available. Finally, two participants said they did not know if they needed help because they were unsure if their needs were “normal.” Cassia’s mom facilitates the process of recognizing that she needs help. Mom will point out when she sees she is stressed and tell her she needs help. For some participants, positive and negative external pressures caused them to realize they needed help.

For Laelia, a negative experience with a faculty member after a midterm pushed them to seek academic support from friends.

Seeking

Seeking is the process of looking for and finding appropriate academic support. Many participants relied heavily on their social support network for academic support. Participants described many ways they used their social support network for academic support. Granola receives support from friends who study with her and hold her accountable to deadlines. Rinus appreciates his group Discord with friends from his major because they remind each other of due dates. Because I want to focus on how these processes function within the specific context of the university, this model describes the part of their academic support network related to university resources such as disability services, advising, tutoring, faculty, and teaching assistants.

Once a participant identified that they needed academic support from a university resource, one of the first barriers to seeking that support was not knowing the process. While this is a common experience of first-year students, autistic participants described a particular desire to plan for new social interactions. Asking for help brought up feelings of vulnerability, the uncertainty of response, and a fear of asking for help rooted in past experiences. As with other process steps, having a social facilitator was said to have helped some participants go to tutoring or get registered with a disability resource center on campus. Sirius sought support from a campus business accelerator lab because it was easy to access. He walked past it every day and finally decided to take a risk and go in to ask questions.

Finding

Finding is the final step in building an academic support network where autistic students find resources they are comfortable using in the future and that provide practical support. Some

participants seeking support had a negative experience at that step and opted out of further help-seeking. For Laelia, a barrier to getting more help from their faculty member developed from their first negative experience asking for help. They felt berated by the faculty member and chose not to ask a second time for needed accommodations. Participants indicated that when the help did not meet their needs or the help was inconsistent, they were much less likely to find academic support from that person or program. Students also experienced a barrier if they had to initiate asking for help once they located a resource.

If staff initiated asking for help, participants were more optimistic about returning. Charis enjoyed going to the writing center with her roommate because “the people asked like what you needed help with, and then they kind of took it from there, so you’re not doing a lot of the advocating...People offering it is easier than asking for it.” Sirius found help at the business accelerator center because the staff member there was welcoming and asked what he could do to help. Rinus, Charis, and Valeria also mentioned that a comfortable physical space facilitated finding academic support from a person or program at the university.

Building Support through University Clubs and Organizations

My research questions focus on how autistic first-year college students build academic and social support networks. I have separated the process for building support through university clubs and organizations because participants talked about their experiences with clubs and organizations as a hybrid of social and academic support. The process for building a support network that includes the social and academic benefits of a university club or organization reflects this hybrid nature, and the data necessitated that I describe it separately. Participants described a process of trying, joining, and continuing as they formed support in university clubs

and organizations. In Figure 4, I display the relationship between the process steps and the barriers and facilitators to these steps.

Figure 4

Theoretical Process Model for Building Support in Clubs and Organizations

	Trying	Joining	Continuing
Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest – boring topic • Anxiety about unfamiliar places and processes • Social energy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing social groups within club • Sensing they are unwanted • Feeling different • Negative self-talk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of belonging
Facilitators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest – special interest • Expectations and norms around typical college experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicit acceptance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special interest highly motivating • Vibing

Trying

Trying is like the first step in building social support, testing. It is initially engaging with a university club or organization that could become a part of their social or academic support networks. Participants were unsure if they wanted to try clubs or organizations at this step. For some, they found the topics of the clubs to be boring. Willow described a club at her university’s autism center as “too academic.” Even without attending, participants put great weight on the subject matter the club would cover. For Mack, the social energy involved in trying a club is just too much:

I also wanted to join a puzzle club and was planning to start my own knitting and crochet club, since there aren't any at my school, but I haven't had enough energy to do either.

Puzzle club would require me to go to a new club at a new location and meet new people, which sounds too draining to deal with currently, and starting my own club would require

a lot of work that I don't really have enough time or energy for. I'm hoping to get everything set up over summer break, since I will be much less busy then.

Finally, Seneca notes that unfamiliarity with the campus hinders participating in “extracurriculars.” Getting lost on the first day of classes has made them less willing to visit buildings they do not know. As with other first steps in building support on campus, anxiety about unfamiliar places, processes, and people was also a barrier to trying out various clubs and organizations.

Conversely, if a club focused on a participant’s special interest, such as geology, gardening, or art, there was more motivation to try a club or organization. Several participants also reported that they felt that joining clubs and organizations was expected. Willow commented that she attended nearly every event she could find in her first semester because she desperately wanted to find friends. The college norm seemed to be that clubs and organizations were necessary for finding friends.

Joining

Joining is the process of going to one or a few club or organization meetings and events. It differs from the final step of continuing in that participants indicated they were attending without committing to long-term membership in the group. Two participants commented that a barrier to attending more than one or two meetings was that they perceived existing friend groups in the club and were uncertain if they were intruding or unwanted. While there were no overt signs that was true, the existing social connections among the group added a layer of uncertainty. This uncertainty and the unfamiliarity with clubs and organizations often caused participants to engage in negative self-talk while trying to join a club or organization. Lucas recalled really wanting to be a part of a club, going there, and feeling lonely being around other

people but feeling like he had not made a connection. Granola had difficulty staying with a plant club because she “was of the mindset that [she] didn’t deserve friends.” As with the social support process, negative self-talk increases stress and anxiety and becomes a barrier to joining clubs and organizations. As for facilitators, participants only mentioned getting explicit statements of acceptance as a condition that helped them join a club or organization. For Taylor, that was the explicit acceptance that came through the bid process of her sorority. For Sirius, joining his residence hall community board was facilitated by his residence coordinator expressing that they were happy he was there and acting like a “coach” and the club president being explicitly welcoming.

Continuing

Continuing is the final step in the process of building a long-term relationship as a member of a club or organization. These clubs or organizations become a continuing part of an autistic college student's support network with both social and academic components. Over time, as some participants continued with clubs and organizations, they found that, while the club was accepting, members never invited them to do things outside the club. Lucas was on the executive board of a school spirit club, but “it would bother [him] ‘cuz, like, I knew they would all like, hang out when they’re not here and I didn’t know if it was like, I’m here and they don’t like me...” Eventually that was a barrier to his continuing with the group.

Despite plants being a special interest, Granola left the plant club for the same reason; however, she continued with the geology club because she vibed with the people. Her injury prevented her from returning this semester, but she noted, “It was fun to go on field trips and talk with them...that was a fun time hanging out and just volunteering.” She kept returning, “...because I like the people there.” Sirius continues with the residence hall community board

because he really likes running things, which feeds that special interest. He also connected with the people and liked hanging out with them outside the organization.

Reflections of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting

As I found models to describe the three processes of building support networks for first-year autistic college students, I also located connected codes that represented barriers and facilitators to those processes. While those codes may have had names like “sensing they are unwanted” or “feeling vulnerable,” I could see how the underlying core process of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting was working within those processes and that elements that reduced the stress produced by the core process were also elements that fed facilitators of the support-building processes. Elements that increased stress from the Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting process were evident in the barriers. The facilitator for finding academic support, a “comfortable/welcoming space,” aligns with the stress-reducing element of a “positive sensory environment.” In the next chapter, I will discuss recommendations for how an understanding of participants’ experiences of the Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting process could help university faculty, staff, and administrators uncover and predict facilitators and barriers I did not find data to support or those present in other processes I did not study.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how autistic college students experience Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting while building social and academic support within the university context and how that experience influences the facilitators and barriers to building support. I additionally evaluated how autistic students experience Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting during the process of finding support in university clubs and organizations. For each area of the support network examined, I describe the process of developing support by using the

data to find emerging categories. I use the grounded theory method of constant comparative analysis to locate the connections between those categories. The three process models helped me understand how these support networks form within the university context and what might underlie the facilitators and barriers in each model. Because participants experience stress from constantly observing social situations, judging themselves, and adapting, facilitators tend to align with the five elements that reduce stress in the Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting model. Barriers tended to be feelings, experiences, or situations that result from higher stress experienced during the recursive process and amplified by prior experiences, the prevalence of neurotypical social norms, and the challenge of the double empathy problem.

In developing my findings, I use a grounded theory methodological perspective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2008, 2014) to collect and analyze data. I apply these methods within a disability studies and neurodiversity paradigm conceptual framework that also informs how I analyze my findings. The theoretical core process of Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting and its application to building support in the university context are a model through which we can explore the lived experiences of autistic college students and understand how they manage the development, growth, and maintenance of academic and social support networks. Additionally, the specific models for each area of the support network explicate facilitators and barriers to autistic first-year students' experience of effective and meaningful support.

In the next and final chapter, I will discuss the implications of the theoretical model of the Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting process with its five elements that may reduce stress and the individual process models for building academic and social support. These models may have broader implications for university administrators, faculty, and staff as they build

programs, policies, and practices that affect autistic students. I will also acknowledge the boundaries of this study and make recommendations for future research and the application of my findings.

CHAPTER 5: ANALYZING, JUDGING, AND ADAPTING

Jennifer: If you were going to give a piece of advice to an autistic first-year college student, what piece of advice would you give?

Cassia: I would say don't overestimate yourself, especially that first week. Because I went in thinking, 'It's all gonna be different now' and 'I'm gonna be great at making friends.' And I think I dismissed my need for some alone time. And then I felt that disappointment. So, I think it's important to try, but it's also not something that needs to change in order for you to feel good. I think everyone has their own balance, and that's okay.

When I began this doctoral program, I intended to research how higher education can support neurodivergent students and leverage their strengths. My interest came from experiences with my autistic daughter and after seeing neurodivergent students in my classes face barriers when navigating the institution. This study reflects a change in focus away from institutional programs and goals and towards the experiences and goals of autistic students. However, my initial aim is still a desired potential outcome. I designed this study to understand autistic students' first-year transition to college through their voices and take a strengths-based look at how autistic students use support networks to navigate this experience. I analyze the study in this chapter to determine if my research questions align with the findings. I translate my findings into actionable ways that higher education can improve support for autistic first-year students and recommend opportunities for future research. Finally, I evaluate this study's implications for theory, methodology, and academic research. The chapter concludes with a brief reflection on how autistic college students adapt and thrive despite being in an environment not built for their needs.

Analyzing: Do the Findings Inform the Research Questions?

A growing number of autistic adults are attending college (Accardo et al., 2019), but higher education may be unprepared to support their needs (Kuder & Accardo, 2018). Despite autistic students' wide range of abilities, fewer than 20% graduate or are on track to graduate within five years (Roux et al., 2015). In reviewing the literature on autistic college students, first-year student retention, and academic and social support networks, I found two existing gaps. Autistic students have lacked a voice in research, including in studies relating to academic and social support and the conditions that inhibit and facilitate positive support experiences.

The classic research on first-year students' transition, retention, and persistence only considers the neurotypical majority, and autistic students may have differing experiences (Astin, 1999; Kuh et al., 2007; Tinto, 1975). My study attempts to understand and describe how autistic students build and experience academic and social support networks during their first-year transition. Rather than looking at specific university programming or using the university's standpoint, I explore how autistic students navigate the unfamiliar environment of the university to create support networks through the students' expression of their lived experience.

Using constructivist grounded theory methods of analysis and a conceptual framework developed from a disability studies and neurodiversity paradigm lens, I center autistic students' experiences. My analysis of participant interview data results in an emerging theory, a core process that may affect how autistic first-year students create support connections. The core process of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting also influences the individual process models that describe facilitators and barriers to academic and social support.

My research purpose was to understand autistic students' first-year transition to college through their voices and to take a strengths-based look at how autistic students use social and academic support networks to navigate this experience. Two research questions guide this study:

3. How do autistic first-year students experience and manage the development, growth, and maintenance of academic and social support networks?
4. What are the facilitators and barriers to autistic first-year students' experience of effective and meaningful support?

While good research may fail to answer intended questions or find answers to unanticipated questions, my findings align with the study's purpose and inform potential answers to the questions presented.

Alignment of Findings

As the core process model of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting emerged, it began to seem like my findings might not align with the research questions. This core process describes a more generalized experience autistic students may have in social situations and is not specific to developing, growing, and maintaining academic and social support networks. While this finding is surprising and unanticipated, the model describes a crucial underlying process that may affect how autistic students develop support networks and influence their experiences of support.

My analysis revealed that during social interactions, the initial codes “analyzing,” “self-judging,” and “adapting” interacted in a recursive cycle where each element is intertwined, causing anxiety, worry, and stress. Certain conditions increase stress for the participants: neurotypical social norms, prior negative experiences with social interaction, and the effects of what Milton (2012) has described as the double empathy problem. Participants also described

conditions that reduced the stress of social interaction: having a shared perception of the world, being in a positive sensory environment, having other people who serve as social facilitators, receiving explicit feedback from others, and managing comorbid conditions. The emerging theory of Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting, while applicable to all social interactions, provides a valuable lens (Figure 1). This theoretical construct allows me to analyze and model the more specific processes of how autistic first-year students develop, grow, and maintain academic and social support networks and identify how the core process may influence the barriers and facilitators to support in college.

To answer my first research question, I used data from participants' lived experiences and my lens of the Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting model to describe how autistic first-year students build social and academic support. In developing, growing, and maintaining social support, participants went through the process of observing, testing, vibing, and trusting. Students described a process of needing, seeking, and finding when building academic support. Finally, the findings indicated that participants use a process of trying, joining, and continuing to build support through university clubs and organizations. The resulting three theoretical process models (Figures 2, 3, and 4) answer the question of how autistic first-year students experience and manage the development, growth, and maintenance of academic and social support networks. In order to build strong relationships and bonds with other students, academic resources, and university organizations, the conditions need to be such that the stress from social engagement is not so great that autistic students feel the best course of action is to opt out of the process. Participants develop, grow, and maintain support as they take steps to navigate these process steps, and they experience support when they can move through all steps of the process.

The second research question asked for an analysis of those processes to determine facilitators and barriers to students' experiences of support. At each process step, my findings suggested that the core process of Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting influenced the barriers and facilitators. While the data did not support a complete list of facilitators and barriers for every step, I identified many. For example, pre-existing social groups within a club or organization are a barrier to joining. Participants worried they were intruding and felt like outsiders to these existing groups. The stress from analyzing the social situation and judging themselves as an interloper or outsider caused participants to adapt by opting out of joining. I used the core process as a lens to view the individual processes of building academic and social support. I then used participants' lived experiences to create a list of barriers and facilitators that answered my second research question.

Adapting: How can we Change to Better Support Autistic College Students?

It is essential that the findings of my study have practical application, as my research aims to inform how universities can systemically change for the better to support the needs of autistic students across all academic and social support dimensions. I will first provide practical recommendations for higher education leaders. Next, I will identify ways that future research could provide valuable information to autistic students and support their agency as they navigate the structures and culture of the university.

Recommendations for Higher Education Leaders

I recommend that higher education leaders use my research findings to understand better the core process of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting (Figure 1) as autistic college students experience it. Increased awareness and understanding among administrators, staff, and faculty can have far-reaching effects beyond any specific program or policy. Next, I recommend

that universities consider specific policies and programs that address the facilitators and barriers to academic and social support I describe in the specific academic and social support process models (Figures 2, 3, and 4). Finally, I encourage higher education leaders to implement these specific policies and programs and continue designing new ones using universal design practices so that programming is not only targeted to autistic students.

Improving Awareness and Understanding

I urge higher education leaders to develop a personal understanding of this study's core process model of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting. Simply understanding how autistic college students may experience social interactions and the ways that neurotypical social norms, negative past experiences, and the effects of the double empathy problem can increase stress can improve communication from allistic administrators, staff, and faculty.

A personal understanding of this study's core process model can also help higher education leaders enact strategies that show a shared perception of the world, create a positive sensory environment, engage social facilitation, provide explicit feedback, and connect students to university services that help manage comorbid conditions. For example, as a university faculty member, the personal understanding I have gained from this research led me to create an activity where class members use class time to visit campus resources in person together in pairs. This activity leverages my understanding of how social facilitators can help to reduce stress in social interactions. I facilitate the partnership with a classmate, and the activity facilitates interaction with an unfamiliar space.

Beyond developing a personal understanding of the core process model, I encourage higher education leaders to develop training for staff and faculty that helps them to create engagement strategies for their classrooms and departments. Training on understanding masking,

how to create positive sensory environments, how to support students with negative past educational experiences, neurotypical social norms such as indirect communication and eye contact, and other concerns related to the components of the Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting model will improve the day-to-day experiences of autistic students. Laelia recounted a negative experience with a faculty member who did not understand her requests for accommodation, where she needed more explicit feedback and clearer expectations from faculty. Training for staff and faculty on developing engagement strategies based on this study's core process model could help reduce everyday stress for autistic students in the classroom, residence halls, dining halls, event programming, and other university spaces.

Specific Policies and Programs

The specific process models for how autistic students build academic and social support developed from this study's findings should be used to adjust existing policies and programs and create new ones within the university. I propose several policies and programs tailored to each process model and the facilitators and barriers identified. I base these recommendations on participant interview data and my data analysis.

Social Support

The social support process model (Figure 2) describes how autistic first-year students build social support by engaging in observing, testing, vibing, and trusting. A specific barrier to the first step of observing is isolation, and two facilitators for engaging in observing are having a major or cohort group and attending classes and events.

First, to address physical isolation, I recommend that universities reevaluate how they allocate housing for autistic students. For students who go through the disability accommodation process, housing administrators should look for placements that decrease isolation while

allowing students to control their sensory environment. Among participants who described their dorm room as being the most comfortable place for them on campus, they described liking having roommates or suitemates but were most happy when they also had a space where they could close the door for privacy. Ultimately, a universal design approach to housing that provides flexible spaces for privacy and interaction is desirable. With this approach, universities can provide accommodations for autistic students without needing students to self-identify or provide medical documentation. Suite-style housing with private rooms and shared common spaces is ideal for providing this flexibility.

Universities can also reduce isolation and facilitate social connection through major or cohort groupings for first-year students. I recommend expanding those groupings to include affinity groups such as LGBTQIA+ cohorts. As several participants noted, finding people with a similar perception of the world improved their chances of building social connections. A residence hall cohort for LGBTQIA+ or genderqueer students could facilitate autistic students' ability to observe potential social connections. Using more complex housing matching algorithms similar to those of Bumble BFF, as recommended by study participants, could assist with creating housing cohorts or even cohorts within the standard university 101 classes for first-year students.

Finally, I suggest universities rethink their approach to first-year student welcome events and how students interact in the classroom during the first weeks of school. Offering welcome events catering to different student interests, affinity groups, and majors can help students find groups of people that share their special interests or their perception of the world. Ensuring that events occur in a positive sensory environment may help autistic students feel more comfortable so that they can seek out potential social connections.

Academic Support

This study's findings regarding the process that autistic students engage in to build academic support (Figure 3) suggest that higher education leaders can develop specific programs and practices that improve seeking and finding behaviors. Fear and dislike of asking for help are barriers for autistic first-year students seeking academic support. When students seek support, several barriers to interacting with support staff and facilities can prevent them from finding long-term academic support. By addressing facilitators to these two process steps, universities can help encourage autistic students to engage in building an academic support system. Universities can best address the barriers to seeking and finding academic support by creating accessible processes within support services and improving the facilities that house resources.

Nearly every participant indicated that they disliked asking for help. Charis described a positive experience with an academic support resource where she did not have to ask for help when she arrived. Several participants indicated they liked engaging with university academic support services and staff who offered help rather than requiring students to ask for help. University academic support services should develop service delivery processes emphasizing offering help over requiring students to ask for help.

Additional recommendations relate to the physical space of the academic support service and its website. Physical locations should be welcoming and comfortable, with attention to the sensory environment. Loud tutoring centers where students must raise their hands to ask for help from a roving tutor are not ideal. Overly quiet or rigid facilities can also be challenging. Providing a variety of spaces to allow students choices for their environment would be ideal. However, given the typical space constraints at a university, working to moderate the noise,

offering a secondary seating option like yoga balls or bean bag chairs, adjusting the lighting, and other minor changes can improve the accessibility of the space for autistic students.

University support services should create websites with photos of their physical location, including a photo of the outside door and how a user proceeds through their facility. Providing a step-by-step description of what happens there and how students should engage with the service is also desirable. If students primarily access services through the website, finding ways to engage students in person and facilitate their using the help services on the site is optimal. For example, discussion boards where students can post questions for academic assistance, which support staff answer publicly, let other students who are afraid to ask that question see the answer.

In all cases, I recommend working to extend offers of help, to provide explicit directions for engaging with the services and descriptions of what to expect when they interact with the service, and to consider how physical spaces can be more comfortable for autistic students. These changes can make getting help easier, reduce stress around engaging with and using the resource, and provide a comfortable and positive sensory environment so autistic students feel welcome.

Club and Organization Support

As I identified in Chapter 3, the process model for how autistic first-year students build support through university clubs and organizations (Figure 4) reflects elements of academic and social support. Though most clubs and organizations are sponsored and overseen by the university, there is a significant component of student leadership and autonomy. However, university leaders can implement changes to facilitate autistic students trying, joining, and continuing with campus clubs and organizations.

University clubs and organizations are often a part of student affairs and student government and have relatively little direct oversight from staff and faculty. However, student affairs staff often train students who run clubs and organizations to perform their leadership roles. Therefore, my recommendations center on supporting student leaders with training and strategies to improve the accessibility of their club or organization. First, I recommend that universities provide templates that prompt student leaders to supply better information about their clubs. Participants indicated they were reluctant to attend a club meeting if they were unsure of what would happen at the meetings, the club's purpose, or if they did not know how to get there. These anxieties about unfamiliar places and processes were barriers to the process step of trying.

I also recommend that universities provide training and tools to help student club and organization leaders be explicitly welcoming and provide clear expectations. Participants described being worried about inserting themselves into an existing social structure and sensing that they are unwanted when they attempt to join a club. Training student leaders to pay attention to how they build community with new members and to provide explicit and direct feedback that shows new members they are valued can help autistic students feel less worry and stress around interacting with a university club or organization. Providing training and tools to student leaders of university clubs and organizations is a relatively simple way that universities can facilitate autistic students' positive experiences of support through clubs and organizations.

Universal Design

In implementing these recommended policies and programs and as universities look to create new programs, I encourage higher education leaders to implement universal design practices so that autistic students do not need to register with the university or identify

themselves as autistic. Universal design is creating systems and environments accessible to all people regardless of disability or other factors by addressing common barriers and designing things to be used by the maximum number of people (Preiser & Smith, 2011). Using universal design practices is necessary to engage all autistic students and students with autistic traits.

For many participants in this study, their relationship to their autistic identity directly impacts their academic and social support engagement. For participants like Lucas, who are unaware they are autistic, university programs targeted only to autistic students are ineffective. Taylor does not choose to identify as autistic at college and would not use programs targeted at autistic students. Participants who do not have medical paperwork to affirm their self-diagnosis cannot use programs that require disability registration or meet policy requirements that demand documentation of their autism. Finally, many participants were simply uninterested in identifying as autistic to the institution.

Recent research also shows that college students with autistic traits who would not meet the diagnostic criteria for autism have increased academic and social difficulties and more significant negative social outcomes than students with an autism diagnosis (McLeod & Anderson, 2022). The interview data from this study and research with non-diagnosed students with autistic traits support implementing the recommended program and policy changes using universal design practices rather than autism-specific programming.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several areas for future research have emerged from this study. The substantive core theory of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting is a preliminary theory that models autistic experiences of social interactions. Gathering data from a larger sample will help validate the model and increase generalizability. Future research that recruits a varied sample population

would help evaluate the utility of this study's core theory and specific support models for a broader population. These sample composition adjustments include testing the model with autistic students from different races, ethnicities, and cultures, finding participants from universities outside the U.S. West and Southwest, recruiting from 2-year colleges, and including students of varying ages. Engaging a larger and more varied sample population may also help to uncover more barriers and facilitators to the process steps in the specific models for how autistic students build academic and social support.

Future work should explore how the core model of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting may be transferable to other disability groups. The social model of disability holds that society creates disablement and has the power to produce and reproduce that disablement through social structures (Goodley, 2001). In the model of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting, neurotypical social norms and the ableist perspective of allistic partners in social interactions create disablement. Future research that tests and modifies the core process model from this study's findings with disabled college students without autism would be beneficial for determining transferability. Additionally, research with populations from other disability groups, such as those diagnosed with a social anxiety disorder, could help identify if the models from this study are specific to autistic student experiences or if comorbid diagnoses influenced the models.

Research to develop a scale or measure that helps autistic college students evaluate their experiences against the three components of the Analyzing, Self-Judging, and Adapting cycle could provide a way for autistic students to identify better strategies for reducing stress in their social interactions. In sharing the findings of this research with autistic college students, it would also be interesting to see if knowledge of the model itself might affect students' ability to build

academic and social support. In interviews, participants expressed feelings of relief when they learned or realized they were autistic. Having an explanatory model for their feelings and experiences helped them reconcile those feelings. Similarly, having explanatory models for how other autistic students experience the transition into college and building academic and social support could assist students in reconciling their feelings and experiences. Research using the models from this study as a tool for autistic college students to make sense of their experiences could directly impact autistic students' stress levels and feelings of belonging.

Another avenue for future research lies in adjusting the study's theoretical framework and methodology. Limitations of the dissertation process and the purpose of the study did not allow for a critical disability studies framework or participatory action research methodology. Participants in this study consistently expressed that they wanted to extend their interviews and that they wanted to talk about their experiences. Several participants indicated they were interested in my findings and would have liked more involvement and participation in the research. They also wanted to be more active in changing social perceptions and structures that affect autistic college students. Future research that works from a critical disability studies perspective with an activist purpose and a participatory action research methodological approach would address participants' expressed desires. In addition, participatory action research, where autistic community members drive research questions, participate in data collection and analysis, and communicate research findings, aligns with best practices from the International Society for Autism Research (INSAR) and other prominent autism research organizations.

Finally, the core Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting process that emerged from this study's data may apply to autistic lived experience outside the university context. I recommend researching whether this model broadly describes autistic experiences during social

interactions. I found connections and congruencies with the research of Black et al. (2023) using a broader autistic population. Participants expressed experiences that directly align with the core model described in this study's findings. Additionally, participants often recounted related experiences from outside the university context. Further research with autistic people who are not college students could provide valuable insight into the experiences of the broader autistic population. The findings from this study support recommendations for university leaders and future research; they also have broader implications for creating academic knowledge.

Judging: What are this Study's Implications?

Using a grounded theory methodology and constructivist grounded theory methods to guide this study, I intended to develop substantive theories or models to describe the processes that emerge from the data. Therefore, my findings around the process model of Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting have theoretical and methodological implications and contribute to the two central bodies of academic literature discussed in Chapter 2: academic and social support for autistic students and the first-year transition of autistic college students.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes a theoretical process model of Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting (Figure 1) that helps to describe how autistic first-year college students experience stress from social interaction and identify the conditions that increase and decrease that stress. This model may have utility beyond the first-year college student population and may be transferrable to other disability groups, including people with social anxiety.

Every autistic person is different; however, there are shared autistic experiences that, in describing them, research can help allistic people to adapt their thinking and behavior. The theoretical process model of Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting may describe a common

experience for autistic people across all social situations. Autistic people who do not communicate verbally may choose to communicate in other ways because the stress of verbal communication causes them to opt out. In excluding autistic people who were not college students, this study cannot provide evidence for applying the theoretical process model in this way; however, there is a possibility for implications beyond the scope of this study's population.

The theoretical process model of Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting may also be a tool for describing the experiences of other disability groups. A recent study suggests that higher-masking autistic people show higher signs of internalizing symptoms, including anxiety and depression (Ross et al., 2023). The findings of Ross et al. (2023) align with this study's finding that adapting interacts with the processes of analyzing and self-judging and results in masking behavior. Doctors frequently diagnose autistic people with social anxiety, generalized anxiety, and depression (Casanova et al., 2020). The theoretical process model could potentially describe social anxiety rather than an experience unique to autism. This study did not separate or compare the experiences of autistic participants with diagnosed social anxiety and without it. If the model does describe an experience unique to autistic people, it may also be transferable with modification to a population of people diagnosed with social anxiety or depression.

The core theoretical process model emerging from this study's data aligns with the study's conceptual framework. The social model views disability as a social construct with power imbalances that restrict and impose an identity upon those with impairments (Baglieri et al., 2011). The theoretical process model of Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting describes how neurotypical social norms restrict autistic people causing them to adapt. These neurotypical social norms also impose an identity, as demonstrated by participants' negative self-judgment and consistent self-identification as "weird."

The neurodiversity paradigm complements the disability studies framework and reconciles the problem of embodied disability. Walker (2014) outlines the three axioms of the neurodiversity paradigm, including that neurodiversity is a natural human variation and, as such, is not a deviation from the neurotypical norm. The theoretical process model of Autistic Self-Judging and Adapting aligns with this perspective. The stress participants experience during social interactions is partially rooted in the naturally different ways that autistic and allistic people view the world.

While I took steps to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of my findings, the study's boundaries restrict the generalization of the theoretical process model to a broader population. To increase the theoretical process model's utility and transferability, I have recommended further avenues of research.

Methodological Implications

This study adds to the body of academic and social support research that uses iterative data collection and inductive data analysis methods. My methodological choices demonstrate ways researchers can work with the autistic population beyond the positivist research typically conducted using the medical model of autism. Specifically, I employed methods of recruitment that encouraged a diverse group of students to participate and leveraged my unique perspective as part of the data analysis process as a tool for deriving knowledge.

This study's methodological strength is the inductive and iterative process I used to explore a question where little research exists, a hallmark of constructivist grounded theory. This iterative style worked well with the autistic college student population, allowing me to listen and adjust to participants' needs. The grounded theory methodology and constructivist grounded theory methods I employed facilitated access to students who may not have otherwise

participated. During recruitment, I contacted the moderators of WrongPlanet.net, an online forum for autistic people, who suggested that Zoom interviews are a barrier to participation. I expanded on the research of Nicolaidis et al. (2020) by using a written iteration of my interview with questions, explanatory information, and idea prompts tailored to the needs of autistic participants. This detailed questionnaire facilitated increased participation in the study.

Recruitment was a strength of the study as I engaged with diverse participants. Autism identification in the U.S. is lower in Black and Hispanic populations due to stigma, socioeconomic factors, and language barriers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Among participants, 38.4% identified as Hispanic, and 7% identified as Asian, which reflects the diversity of the university communities where my study was most widely shared— additionally, 53.8% identified as a woman. Boys are more commonly diagnosed with autism, and girls and women are diagnosed later (Green et al., 2019). Adult diagnosis is expensive and hard to find, which can cause inequities for women and minorities (Sarrett, 2016). Limiting this study's participants to those diagnosed would reinforce a medical model of autism and contradict the study's disability studies and neurodiversity paradigm conceptual framework. Accepting self-diagnosis verifies autistic expertise and self-knowledge. Including people with medical diagnoses and self-diagnosed people in this study has encouraged participant diversity.

Qualitative research acknowledges and relies upon the researcher's perspective as a participant in the research. This study leverages my positionality to shape data collection and analysis using a grounded theory methodology and constructivist grounded theory methods. My position as neurodivergent, a doctoral student, a teacher, and a mother of an autistic college student provides me with knowledge and understanding essential to this study. As Charmaz (2014) notes, "Just as the methods we choose influence what we see, what we bring to the study

also influences what we *can* see” (p. 27). I am uniquely positioned to use my past experiences as a part of knowledge construction and employed strategies to enhance transparency and reflexivity and improve trustworthiness and credibility, as described in Chapters 3 and 4. A strength of this study lies in my methodological choices that enhanced participation for autistic college students and enriched data collection and analysis by drawing on my knowledge and expertise. By making these choices and demonstrating their effectiveness, this study enriches our understanding of methods researchers should use when working with an autistic population.

Scholarly Implications

This study’s findings contribute to the research literature on academic transition and support networks in the autistic college student population, particularly by adding findings developed from the lived experiences of autistic students. As I discuss how this study fills knowledge gaps, I will also expand upon how it, in alignment with its conceptual framework, fills these gaps by elevating the voices of autistic students on a topic where they have frequently been missing.

Contributions to Academic and Social Support Network Literature

Many universities offer support programs for their students during the first-year transition and beyond. While there are complexities and overlap between academic and social support, a limited number of existing studies consider both components together (Cai & Richdale, 2016; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Thompson, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2005). The prevailing opinion in the literature, using a medical model of autism, views autistic students as unskilled at building friendships (Brownlow et al., 2015). The existing literature on academic and social support for autistic first-year students highlights several areas for attention, including the need for new

research to use an iterative data collection process where students are engaged in dialogue that allows for inductive data analysis.

This study helps to fill gaps in our understanding of autistic college students' academic and social support networks. By contributing a model of a core process of Autistic Recursive Self-Judging and Adapting, this study deepens knowledge of the factors that influence the specific processes participants use to build academic and social support within the first-year transition. It also contributes to the academic literature by analyzing these support components holistically with an underlying process that connects the processes of building academic, social, and university club and organization support. Existing studies' results were inconclusive or found that, because each person with autism is so different, autistic students needed individualized support programs (Gelbar et al., 2014; Kuder & Accardo, 2018). While this study did not specifically address support programs and the need for individualization, I created substantive theories for processes common to all participants. In my recommendations, I addressed how this study's findings could inform support programs at individual and group levels.

Contributions to First-Year Transition Literature

Research on the academic transition to higher education centers on both entering college and graduating (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007). A broad body of research discusses how a student's first-year transition may impact retention and completion (Pascarella, 1985; Schlossberg, 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Tinto, 1975, 1993). These existing models do not consider the specific experiences of autistic students, and their focus on belonging, adjustment, integration, and engagement may not apply. Literature on first-year transition also highlights a lack of unified recommendations for the autistic student population. This literature argues for future research

that uses methods tailored to the needs of the autistic population and takes a strengths-based approach focused on individual student experiences.

This study contributes to the literature on the first-year transition for autistic students by using methods tailored to the students' needs and by focusing on individual student experiences. In conducting recruitment, members of the autistic community expressed a need for an interview option beyond the Zoom platform. I created a detailed questionnaire that achieved comparable results for most participants. My tailored approach contributes to filling a gap in the first-year transition literature. Additionally, by using a conceptual framework, methodology, and methods that focus on the experiences of individual autistic first-year students, this research helps to fill the gap in the understanding of individual students' lived experiences.

Contributions to Literature on Double Empathy Problem

Milton's (2012) work on the double empathy problem theorizes that communication disconnects between autistic and allistic people result from a breakdown in mutual understanding. The results of this study complement and support the double empathy literature. When participants in this study experienced higher stress levels during social interactions, that stress often resulted from their attempts to analyze a social situation and adjust to neurotypical social norms. When participants and their communication partners had a shared perception of the world, they experienced less stress because there were fewer breakdowns in understanding. They also experienced less pressure to adjust to neurotypical social norms by masking. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on how the double empathy problem ascribes communication disconnects and deficits to allistic people and neurotypical social norms.

Contributions to Literature on the Autistic College Student Population

Much of the existing research on the autistic college student population uses quantitative or mixed-methods methodologies and methods. This study contributes to the literature by using a conceptual framework that requires space for autistic people to contribute to the research. Additionally, I employed questioning techniques in both the intensive interviews and the questionnaire that expanded our understanding of how to interview autistic participants best (Nind, 2008; Seidmann, 2021). This study has applicability to the literature on interviews and research methods used when working with an autistic population.

Participant's Advice for Autistic First-Year College Students

Near the end of each interview, I asked participants if they could provide a piece of advice to other autistic college students starting their first year. While I asked participants to advise other students, their advice often reflected how they had learned and grown. As higher education institutions adapt to better support autistic college students, it is crucial to recognize how autistic students are adapting to the institution. I conclude with advice from Sirius that reflects the positive experience he has created for himself during his transition into college.

Oh goodness. I would tell them that they're going to do a lot better than they may think. Um, that, like getting involved in whatever they're comfortable with, is a fantastic way to make friends and that, um, now they get to decide when they want to step out of their comfort zone. And that, you know, being in control of your own life and your active decisions for probably the first time in 18 years is a very freeing feeling.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Institutional Review Board for the Human Research Protection Program

Office of Research Compliance

525 S Beaver St
PO Box: 4062
Flagstaff AZ 86011
928-523-9551
https://www.nau.edu/IRB

To: Jennifer Miller
From: NAU IRB Office
Approval Date: October 7, 2022

Project: Creating Networks: How Autistic College Students Build Support
Project Number: 1934872-2
Submission: Revision
Action: APPROVED
Project Risk Level: MINIMAL RISK
Approval Expiration Date: September 28, 2027

Review Category/ies: The project is not federally funded or supported and has been deemed to be no more than minimal risk.

This project has been reviewed and approved by an IRB Chair or designee.

- Northern Arizona University maintains a Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (FWA #00000357).
• All research procedures should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the guidance.
• The Principal Investigator should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that affect the protocol and report any unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others. Please refer to Guidance Investigators Responsibility after IRB Approval, Reporting Local Information and Minimal Risk or Exempt Research.
• All documents referenced in this submission have been reviewed and approved. Documents are filed with the HRPP Office within IRBNet. If subjects will be consented, the approved consent(s) are available within IRBNet upon approval notification from the HRPP Office.

Important

The principal investigator for this study is responsible for obtaining all necessary approvals before commencing research. Please be sure that you have satisfied applicable external and University requirements, for example (but not limited to) data repositories, listserv permission, records request, data use agreement, conducting University surveys, data security, international, conflicts of interest, biological safety, radiation safety, HIPAA, FERPA, FDA, sponsor approval, clinicaltrials.gov, tribal consultation, or school approval. IRB approval does not convey approval to commence research in the event that other requirements have not been satisfied.

APPENDIX B: CONSENT SCRIPT

Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Creating Networks: How Autistic College Students Build Support

Principal Investigator: Jennifer R. Miller

Before we begin, you have the choice to conduct this interview verbally or in writing using the Zoom chat function. You can ask that you, I, or both of us communicate verbally or in writing. You can also turn off your Zoom camera and ask that I turn off mine. How do you prefer that we communicate during the interview? [Continue in the participant's chosen manner of communication]

This interview will be part of my research as a doctoral student at Northern Arizona University. I want to understand how autistic students create and experience academic and social support networks during their first-year transition into college. My purpose in undertaking this study is to understand autistic students' first-year transition to college through their voices and to take a strengths-based look at how autistic students use social and academic support networks to navigate this experience. Your participation will involve an informal interview lasting between sixty and ninety minutes. Please know that I will do everything I can to protect your privacy. Notes, chat logs, and recordings that are taken during the interview will be stored in a secure location. If at any time during our discussion you feel uncomfortable answering a question, please let me know, and you don't have to answer it. If at any time you want to withdraw from this study, please tell me, and I will erase the recording and chat log of the interview. Do you have any questions about the study? [answer as needed] Do you agree to participate and allow me to record the interview?

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interviews are open-ended conversations, and I ask follow-up and clarifying questions during each interview as indicated in the right column. This guide is meant to assist me in conducting a comfortable and detailed interview and does not represent a script. I conducted interviews virtually via Zoom or detailed questionnaire, and each interview lasted approximately 60 to 120 minutes.

Objective or Primary Question	Details or Follow-Up Questions
Start Zoom cloud recording after gaining assent	I will start recording this session via the Zoom cloud recording feature. And then, we will review the study information, and I will ask for your consent to be interviewed. Do I have your permission to start my recording?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review study information • Affirm consent to participate and record the interview 	Use the Consent Script to review the study information and gain consent to conduct the interview and record.
Provide an overview of the interview structure.	<p>Highlights:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First, I have a few basic information questions. • For the rest of the interview, I have a few open-ended questions that I can use to start a conversation on a sub-topic, but I want to understand your experiences in your words without imposing my own words or judgments. I know that sometimes open-ended questions can feel hard to answer because you don't know where to start. Please let me know if you want an example, or a more specific question. • Please feel free to tell me any stories or details you want to share, even if you don't think that was precisely the question I asked. • Since I'm interested in learning more about your experiences, I may ask you to provide specific examples

	<p>or more detail about what you mean. I may even ask you how you define what might seem like a common word. If you ever feel like a question is too personal, you can tell me to shut up whenever you want.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no right or wrong answers, so please respond with whatever comes to mind. • Please ask if you want to know anything about me or my experiences. I will let you know that I am neurodivergent, but I am not diagnosed with autism. I have an autistic daughter who is 19 and a sophomore at USC. I am interested in this research topic because I work with first-year college students and want to understand how universities can better support autistic students. The first step towards that is understanding how autistic students create support networks. While the focus of this interview is your experiences, it is a conversation, and I want you to feel comfortable with me. Your trust is important to me. • Do you have any questions about how the interview will run?
<p>Collect some basic information</p>	<p>There are just a few pieces of information I want to collect before we start.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have a preferred pseudonym you would like me to use when referring to you in my work? • I typically call people autistic rather than saying ‘person with autism’ or using the Aspergers’ label. What do you prefer? • To confirm, do you use the pronouns _____? What gender should I use when talking about you in my work? • Can I identify you as a particular race? What is that? • What college or university do you attend?

<p>I would like to know about your background and home. Can you tell me about your hometown and family?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me a bit about where you are from? • What is your family like? • Where are you currently living? • Who lives with you, if anyone?
<p>How important is being autistic to you? Are there other identities you feel are important to you?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you know you were autistic? • Who told you? • Do you like being autistic? • Are there things you don't like? • What does being autistic mean to you? • What experiences come to mind when I ask what being autistic means to you?
<p>Tell me about how you came to [participant university]?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you choose [participant university]? • Did your autism play a role in choosing this university? • What did you expect your college experience to be like? • What has your experience been like so far?
<p>To what extent is there a place for autism and autistic people on your campus?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What experiences lead to that conclusion? • How have you seen support for autism and autistic people on campus? • How have you seen pushback against autism and autistic people on campus?
<p>Where do you feel most comfortable on campus?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If they say their dorm, ask if there is a space other than

<p>To clarify, that can mean your dorm, even if it isn't directly on campus.</p>	<p>their dorm where they feel most comfortable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes you feel comfortable there? • Are there spaces where you feel uncomfortable or less comfortable? • What about those spaces makes you uncomfortable or less comfortable?
<p>Before we talk about support, I want to discuss the need for support and the concept of help. In your life, how do you know when you are facing a problem or challenge? Are there any signs?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What level of challenge would prompt you to seek out help? • Can you tell me about a past challenge or problem you faced? • How did you know it was a problem? • Did you seek out help or support? • Do you like to ask for help? • What does it take for you to ask for help?
<p>Now I want to talk more specifically about support. I want to talk about social support and academic support specifically, but any sort of support is on the table to discuss. How would you describe your support system?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking of your support network, are there any specific people, offices, or organizations you would call out? • [For individual people named] How would you label your relationship with that person? Are they a friend, just someone you know, a classmate, etc.? • What kinds of support do they offer? • Who, if anyone, do you feel is your primary social support person? How did they become your primary social support person? Can you think of an experience or time that influenced that? • Who or what, if anyone, do you feel is your primary academic support? How did it/they become your primary academic support? • If you thought of all the people in your life who support your academic and social activities, who would that be? • How do you go about finding support either from people

	<p>or offices, or organizations?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who has been most helpful to you so far at [participant university]? • Have you registered with your campus' disability services (or similar office)? If yes, are you willing to share what accommodations you should receive? If not, what led to that decision?
<p>When thinking about your support system, in what ways do you give support to others?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you decide when to offer support? • What do you do? • How do you feel about your efforts to give support to others?
<p>When, if at all, did you first experience feeling supported on campus?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was that like? • If you remember, what were you thinking then? • Who, if anyone, was involved? When was that? How were they involved? • Who or what, if anyone/anything, influenced your actions?
<p>Let's talk more about some specific examples. Tell me about a time when you received help or support or when you felt supported.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was that like? • If you remember, what were you thinking then? • Who, if anyone, was involved? When was that? How were they involved?
<p>Can you tell me about a time you felt unsupported since you have been at [participant university]?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was that like? • If you remember, what were you thinking then? • Who, if anyone, was involved? When was that? How were they involved?
<p>As you reflect on your time at [participant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was that like?

<p>university], are there other experiences, events, people, offices, or organizations that stand out as you think about your experience or feelings of support?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you remember, what were you thinking then? • Who, if anyone, was involved? When was that? How were they involved?
<p>I'd like to know more about your day-to-day life and experiences. Can you tell me about your academic and social life on campus?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the last two weeks, what social activities have you participated in? • Are your social activities mostly done in real life or online? • How many people typically participate in social activities you participate in? • How many close friends do you have? Are all those at school? • If you had a personal emergency in your life, who would you go to for help? • With whom do you communicate when you are sad, lonely, happy, stressed, or uncertain? • How do you communicate with them? • How are your classes going? • What is easy about your classes? • What is hard? • Are there any specific problems or challenges you've faced that you haven't told me about yet? • What is the source(s) of those problems? • Is there anything that helps you manage those problems?
<p>What do you think contributes most to your feeling supported on campus?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who or what contributes to this feeling? • When does it happen most often? • Where does it happen most often?

<p>What do you think prevents you from feeling supported or makes you feel unsupported?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who or what contributes to this feeling? • When does it happen most often? • Where does it happen most often?
<p>I want to briefly talk about what may be different about how you access or feel support in college versus in high school. Can you describe what you see as the same or different?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think things are the same/different? • Is this a positive or negative change?
<p>Wrap-Up – Our time is almost over, but I want to ensure I haven’t missed something that would help me understand your experiences. Is there something I might not have thought about that occurred to you during this interview?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What advice would you give to autistic first-year students just starting college? • What else do I need to understand better related to your experiences? • Is there anything I could do to make these interviews better for you if we do this again or for others? • Is there anything you would like to ask me? • Do you have any additional questions about the study?
<p>Thank the participant for their time and responses.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure your contact information is correct and that they have mine. • Discuss the possibility of follow-up interviews and ask how they would like me to contact them (email, text)

APPENDIX D: DETAILED QUESTIONNAIRE

To accommodate participants wanting a fully-written interview, I developed a detailed questionnaire with questions, explanatory information, and idea prompts (Nicolaidis et al., 2020). This detailed questionnaire, like the intensive interview questions, changes over time as I systematically analyze each interview and target emerging conceptual categories. This is the final version of the questionnaire.

Introduction

Your responses to this questionnaire will be part of my research as a doctoral student at Northern Arizona University. I want to understand how autistic students create and experience academic and social support networks during their first-year transition into college. My purpose in undertaking this study is to understand autistic students' first-year transition to college through their voices and to take a strengths-based look at how autistic students use social and academic support networks to navigate this experience. Your participation will involve responding to the questions, which may take sixty minutes to complete. Please know that I will do everything I can to protect your privacy. Responses will be stored in a secure location separate from identifying information. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question at any time during participation, you may skip the question. If you want to withdraw from this study, please exit the survey without submitting it. If you have any questions before beginning, please email me at jrm977@nau.edu or text/call 480-389-4536. Thank you very much for your time and support.

Instructions and Background

The questions I have are open-ended. I know that sometimes open-ended questions can feel hard to answer because you don't know where to start. Please feel free to tell me any stories or details you want to share, even if you don't think that was precisely the question I asked. I'm interested in learning about your experiences. I appreciate detailed responses that are similar to what you might give during an interview.

For many questions, I have indicated some things you might write about related to that question. These are just ideas to help you think of things to write.

If you ever feel like a question is too personal, you can skip that question or only answer in a way that is comfortable for you.

There are no right or wrong answers, so please respond with whatever comes to mind.

1. Please enter the 4-digit ID provided in your email
2. What pseudonym did you select to use? If you want me to choose, please indicate that.

3. I typically call people autistic rather than saying ‘person with autism’ or using the Aspergers’ label. What do you prefer?
4. What gender would you like me to use for you?
5. What pronouns should I use when referring to you?
6. What race and/or ethnicity do you identify as?
7. What college or university do you attend?
8. What year are you (don't count earned credits that qualify you for a higher year)?
9. Tell me about your hometown and family. You could discuss where you are from, who you live with at home, and what your family is like.

Primary Questions

10. How important is being autistic to you? Are there other identities that are important to you? You might also write about how and when you learned you were autistic, what you like about being autistic, and if there is anything you don't like about being autistic. I am also interested in understanding if you identify as LGBTQ+, disabled, of a religious background, etc. if those are important to you.
11. Tell me about how you came to the college or university you are attending now. You might write about how you chose this school, what you thought going to this school would be like, and what it was like to start attending this school.
12. To what extent is there a place for autism and autistic people on your campus? You might write about what experiences led you to this opinion, the ways you have seen autistic people supported on campus, and how you see autism and autistic people are not supported on campus.
13. Where do you feel most comfortable on campus? Where do you feel uncomfortable or less comfortable? To clarify, that can mean your dorm, even if it isn't directly on campus. You might write about what makes you feel comfortable in your most comfortable space. For your less comfortable space, you might write about why that space is less comfortable.
14. How do you know when you are facing a problem or challenge? Are there any signs?
15. What level of challenge would prompt you to seek out help? You might write about a past challenge or problem you faced, if you sought help, and, if so, what prompted you to seek help.

16. Do you like to ask for help? Why or why not? In particular, some participants have indicated the primary reason they don't like asking for help is that they are not sure that what they need help with is "normal." If you don't like asking for help, please indicate if you also feel concerned about your request for help being "normal" or that doesn't apply to you.

Support Questions

These next questions deal with support. I am most interested in social support and academic support, but any sort of support is interesting to me. I define support as the provision of assistance, protection, or comfort to others or the assistance, protection, and comfort given to others. Social support is typically given or received to help someone cope with biological, psychological, and social stressors. From the American Psychological Association: "It may take the form of practical help (e.g., doing chores, offering advice), tangible support that involves giving money or other direct material assistance, and emotional support that allows the individual to feel valued, accepted, and understood". Academic support is typically given or received to help someone increase their academic skills, abilities, or confidence. Support may arise from any interpersonal relationship in an individual's social network, including family members, friends, peers, neighbors, university programs or employees, religious institutions, colleagues, caregivers, or support groups.

17. How would you describe your support system? You might write about specific people, offices, or organizations that you have found to be part of your support network or system.
18. Who, if anyone, is currently your primary social support person? You might also write about their relationship with you. Are they your friend, classmate, parent, other relative, etc.?
19. If you have a primary social support person, how did they become your primary social support? You might also describe an experience or time that shows why they are your primary social support person.
20. What kinds of support do you get from your social support network? You might write about specific people you get social support from and the types of support you received. This support might fall in to the categories of practical help, tangible support, or emotional support). Describe some specific experiences where you felt support in your social life.
21. Who or what currently provides your primary academic support (if you receive academic support)? If you get academic support from someone, you might also write about their relationship with you. Are they your friend, classmate, parent, another relative, etc.? If you get academic support from an organization or your school, please provide details about that organization, club, center, program, etc.

22. If you have academic support, how did it or they become your primary academic support? You might also describe an experience or time that shows why they are your primary academic support.
23. Thinking about the acquaintances and friends you have made at your university (if any), please tell me how you met those people. If you haven't made any friends yet, tell me about any attempts you have made. I am interested in understanding how people identify those that might make a good friend or social support person. In particular, I am looking for details about how you identified potential friends and what the process of building that friendship. Many participants have used the term 'vibing.' If that term applies, tell me what it means to you and how you can tell if someone is going to vibe with you.
24. How do you go about finding support either from people or offices, or organizations?
25. Who has been most helpful to you so far at your college or university? Why? You might describe a time or experience that is an example of the help you have received.
26. Have you registered with the disability services office on your campus (or similar office)?
27. If yes, please share what accommodations you should receive. If no, what led to that decision? If you are unsure or had another answer, please explain.
28. When thinking about your support system, in what ways do you give support to others?
29. Thinking back to when you first started at your university, when, if at all, did you first experience feeling supported on campus? You might write about what happened, who was involved, what emotions you felt, or how you felt after that experience.
30. Do you have any other examples of a time when you received help or support or when you felt supported at your college or university? I am particularly interested in other experiences when you started college or in your first year. You might explain what happened, who was involved, what emotions you felt, or how you felt after the experience(s).
31. Please tell me about a time or times you felt particularly unsupported since you have been at your college or university. This might be a time or times when you encountered a challenge or felt a need for support and you didn't receive support. It might be a time where the involvement of other people, groups, or university organizations made the issue worse. I am particularly interested in experiences from your first year. You might explain what happened or why you felt unsupported, who was involved, what emotions you felt, or how you felt after the experience(s).
32. As you reflect on your time at your college or university, are there other experiences, events, people, offices, or organizations that stand out as you think about your experience

or feelings of support? You might explain what happened, who was involved or where you were, what emotions you felt, or how you felt after the experience(s).

33. Describe the overall way you built your existing support system that you use in college. I am particularly interested in learning what you did when you first started school to build support and how that may have changed over time. You might describe how you met your primary friend group, ways that your support network changed over time as you started college and in future years if you are past your first year.

Academic and Social Life

The next questions ask you to describe your academic and social life so that I can have a better understanding of your day-to-day life.

34. Have you joined or tried to join any clubs or other organizations on campus? If so, please describe what it was like to start, whether or not you continued to participate, and what influenced your decision to continue or not continue. Some participants have indicated they have not tried to join a club because they aren't interested or it is difficult to go to a meeting. Some participants have indicated that they have tried to join a number of clubs or organizations and have not continued. They have indicated a number of reasons for not continuing. I am interested in understanding if people who are not continuing are feeling unwelcome, feel that the existing social group is exclusionary, or if there are other reasons. If you have joined a club and continue to go, I want to know what keeps you attending.
35. Would you say more of your social activities take place in person or online?
36. Thinking about social situations, do you find that you are constantly analyzing social situations or checking yourself to ensure you are meeting social norms? If so, describe that process for me. Is that a stressful process? Do you think you interpret other people's social interactions correctly? Is there anything that makes you analyze yourself less? If you are not analyzing social interactions or interpreting them, what is your self-talk like during social interactions?
37. Many people I have interviewed have said that they feel more relaxed about social situations when they vibe with people, when they are with other "weird" people, when they are with other members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and/or when they are with other neurodiverse people. Is that something you also experience? If so, what types of people make you more relaxed and why? Are these interactions more successful or supportive? If you don't feel more relaxed, please give me your thoughts.
38. If you were going to change how neurotypical people interacted with you, what would you change? Many people focus on changing autistic people to fit non-autistic social norms. I am interested in knowing what you would have non-autistic people change to support you. Some participants have indicated that neurotypical people could be more clear, direct, reassuring etc.

39. What social or academic activities are you planning to attempt in the next semester? Why do you want to attempt them?
40. How are your classes going? You might write about what is easy with your classes, what is hard about your classes, what you like about your college classes, or what you dislike.
41. Please describe any specific problems or challenges you've faced that you haven't told me about yet (if any). You might write about the details of the problem or challenge, if you have done anything to try to solve the problem or make a change, the source of the problem, or anything that helps you manage the problem or challenge.
42. What do you think contributes most to your feeling supported at your college or university?
43. What do you think prevents you from feeling supported or makes you feel unsupported at your college or university?
44. What, if anything, is different about how you access or feel support in college versus in high school? You might describe what you see as the same or different and whether you think any differences are positive or negative.
45. What advice would you give to autistic first-year students just starting college?
46. Would you be open to an additional questionnaire or interview?