Neuroqueering Gender

Introduction

Autism is a unique way of being, and it grants autistic people the capacity to have experiences in ways that are inherently unrelatable and inaccessible to allistics (non-autistics). Autism is pervasive, not just impacting, but creating, shaping, and informing all parts of our selves and our lives - including our genders.

An autistic experience of gender is worth study in its own right, but gender and autism are already deeply intertwined. Historically, autism has been interpreted as a "masculine" condition, and autistic women, girls, and others who do not fit that male profile have thus been understudied, underdiagnosed, underreported, underrecognized, and underserved. Also significant is the connection between autism and gender-defying identities: we are more likely than allistics to identify as transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, or gender non-conforming.

Basing my inquiry on existing literature about the relationship between autism and gender, especially writing by autistic people themselves, I conducted qualitative interviews with four nonbinary autistic people to gain a deeper understanding of what "autistic gender" is, and further, what it means for us to do autistic gender.

Authorial Orientation

Like other feminist sociologists, I believe it is necessary for ethical, honest, and authentic scientific study that we as researchers identify our position in relation to the people we work with. I am myself a nonbinary, transgender, autistic person, and I identify as woman-proximal, meaning that while I do not identify as a woman, I do identify with womanhood. I am among the many autistic scholars who are lucky enough that their academic interests and special interest overlap: in my case, gender, disability, and selfhood.

Throughout the paper, I often use words like "we" and "us." This is a deliberate linguistic choice, made in part to establish solidarity with the people whose stories I am telling, and in part to remind the reader that I am listening to and analyzing these stories from a place of intimate and personal understanding.

Paradigmatic Foundations

The Neurodiversity Paradigm

For decades, autism has been defined by the pathology paradigm, a set of dominating assumptions that justify the medicalization of autistic behavior and autistic people. The pathology paradigm assumes that there is only one "right," "normal," or "healthy" way for a

human mind to function, and that human minds that diverge are indicators of disorder or disease, generally with the implication that such divergent minds necessitate “correction” or “cure.”

In the midst of a growing movement for autistic self-advocacy and community in the late twentieth century (see Silberman), Judy Singer, herself an autistic woman, coined the term “neurodiversity” in 1998. This word hailed the proliferation of a new paradigm: one that accepts the natural diversity of the human mind, and encourages the accommodation and celebration of human minds that have traditionally been pathologized and marginalized (Walker, 2014).

In his essay, “Throw Away the Master’s Tools: Liberating Ourselves from the Pathology Paradigm,” Walker explains that the pathology paradigm currently defines the language and concepts we use to talk about autism. In the language of the neurodiversity paradigm, autistic people are not “people with a disease,” but a marginalized neurominority. It is through this lens, Walker suggests, that autistic people, and all those who engage with us, must learn to reinterpret the knowledge we have about autism and what it means to be autistic. Walker says that, when autistic people reject the pathology paradigm and accept the neurodiversity paradigm, “...it turns out that maybe you function exactly as you ought to function, and that you just live in a society that isn’t sufficiently enlightened to effectively integrate people who function like you. And that maybe the troubles in your life have not been the result of any inherent wrongness in you. And that maybe everything you’ve heard about Autism is open to question, and that your true potential is unknown and and is yours to explore” (237).

There are some clear parallels between these sentiments and the ones often shared by the queer rights movement, namely, that difference has the potential to be beautiful and valuable, and that models that pathologize difference are unjust and harmful. Those parallels bring up an interesting possible combination of neurodiversity and queerness.

In her essay “Christmas Effects,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says that queer can refer to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituents of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (5). Yet, queerness is not just about gender and sexuality, she says. “[A] lot of the most exciting recent work around ‘queer’ spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: [...] identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses” (9). Neurodivergences like autism can certainly constitute identity, yet they routinely fracture ways in which we conceptualize and understand identity and how it is performed. Other parts of queer theory also become relevant in the study of gender and autism. Butler’s ideas of “doing” gender - as performance, as task, as routine - are particularly salient.

Other disability theorists have made connections between queer theory and identity-constituting, identity-fracturing neurodivergence, resulting in the development of neuroqueer theory. Nick Walker (2015) says that to neuroqueer, as a verb, might involve practices including seeing one’s neurodivergences as constituting queerness, actively choosing to embrace - and refusing to suppress - neurodivergence in yourself, and even intentionally altering

("queering") one's own behavior and cognition in ways that bring you closer to authenticity and wholeness in your neurodivergence.

From any of these perspectives, choosing to value autism, to view it as a valid neurotype, and to embrace and validate the ways in which we are created and sustained by autism and as autistic beings, constitutes an intentional pushing and twisting of boundaries of social meaning, just as queer identity and practices of queering do. Yet, queerness and autism have a long history of interconnection that goes beyond these theories of relative recency.

Gendered Autism and Autistic Gender: Sociohistorical Contexts

A History of Gendered Autism

Although autistic people have existed far before autism was described or named, among the first to do so was Hans Asperger, a German psychologist in the first half of the 1900s. In his study of autism, he focused almost exclusively on autistic boys, a decision that has continued to impact diagnostic criteria. He said that his clinic had never seen "a girl with the fully fledged picture of autism" but had seen "several mothers of autistic [male] children whose behavior had decidedly autistic features" (Silberman, 99). In his history of autism, *NeuroTribes*, Steve Silberman suggests that a more likely explanation was that Asperger's clinic operated on referrals from teachers and judges of juvenile court, and the socialization of young women in general often leads to young autistic women working overtime to "suppress the behaviors that brought their male counterparts to the attention of the authorities" (Silberman, 100). Silberman points out that this is likely still a major factor in the underestimation of autism in women today.

Beyond the pathologization of "externalized" autistic behaviors is the pathologization of non-conformity in general. Gender non-conformity and sexual "deviance" are two of the most prominent examples of this type of pathologization, and they, too, have a history of interconnection with autism. To describe this, we must first look back to the 1960s, when Ivar Lovaas, a behavioral psychologist, developed "applied behavioral analysis" or ABA, which became and has endured as among the most popular "therapies" for autism. Based on the operant conditioning that is used to train animals, ABA is better considered a practice of organized torture and abuse that seeks to enforce conformity. ABA involves a series of punishments that range from withholding food, to ignoring autistic children's attempts to express emotion or pain, to electric shock. Like most abuse, ABA is effective in the behaviors it intends to enforce, and conformity to gender and sexuality roles are no exception. ABA practices are frequently used in the context of "conversion therapy," and Lovaas himself was involved with the implementation of ABA as "behavioral treatment of deviant sex-role behaviors in a male child," informally called "The Sissy Boy Experiment."

Other connections between gender and autism are extreme, though no less horrifying in the context of the autistic people who have endured their effects. It is impossible to discuss gender and autism without recalling Simon Baron-Cohen's theory of "extreme male brain"

theory. In a modern take on the idea of separate spheres, Baron-Cohen suggests that the "two sexes" might be distinguished by "systematizing," which he describes at length as, among other things, "the drive to analyze variables" and "derive...underlying rules," and "empathizing," which he says allows one to "predict a person's behavior, and to care about how others feel" (Baron-Cohen, 2002). Since 2002, autistic theory has had the misfortune to be dominated by his unpleasantly sexist, gender-essentialist, ableist "extreme male brain theory of autism": that autistic people are characterized by systematizing, and are therefore characterized by "extreme maleness."

Baron-Cohen's theories of "neurobiological sex differences" have been well-dissected by feminist neurobiologist Cordelia Fine (2010), but even outside of academic literature, any nonbinary person or autistic person who has struggled with hyperempathy will find Baron-Cohen's work utterly bemusing, if not overtly insulting. Unfortunately, given the long history of sexism in the neurosciences and in the psychological study of autism, Baron-Cohen's authority has been eagerly accepted by the clinical community, and his theories have made the plight of autistic women, and others who do not fit the profile of extreme maleness, much worse.

There is a common assumption that autism is more prevalent in boys than in girls: the "four to one ratio" figure is often repeated. Yet, the little research that exists on whether this might be the case suggests that it is not, that diagnostic norms have been developed exclusively through interaction with autistic boys and are therefore ill-equipped to understand the experiences of autistic women, and that there is a persistent problem of gender bias within autism diagnosis (Halladay et al., 2015; Haney, 2016; Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011). Furthermore, autistic women have written at length about their experiences with underdiagnosis, misdiagnosis, and gender bias even after diagnosis. Some autistic women have even written their own models for autism in women, frustrated by a lack of resources (Simone, 2010; Craft, 2018).

It is ultimately agreed by proponents of both a medical and neurodivergence model that women are underdiagnosed and diagnostic norms must change in order to effectively care for autistic people who are not men. Yet, from a neurodiversity perspective, gendered epidemiology is a relic of the pathology paradigm. Indeed, "underdiagnosis," a medicalized quantification of a spectrum experience that is not inherently medical, is not necessarily the problem at hand, either. I argue that the issue of priority is *underrecognition* and *underserving* of the kinds of autistic people who do not neatly match the Little Professor or Extreme Male Brain archetypes, the kinds of autisms that are labeled "atypical," the kinds of autistic people who are usually women or woman-proximal and non-cisgender.

More likely than the sexist and gender-essentialist assumption that autistic women behave differently due to their "female biology" is the fact that there are vastly different characteristics expected of women to begin with. Autistic women are sometimes able to either learn to adopt these characteristics or to learn to fly under the radar, to internalize and dissociate. After all, women, allistic or autistic, are often called to learn these latter skills in order to survive.

If we consider that women are more likely to conform for the sake of survival, we are able to gain a much more nuanced understanding of how women and other non-men may

realistically express being autistic. Cynthia Kim (2013) writes, “Autistic girls learn early in life that they are different in a socially unacceptable way. Ill-equipped to navigate a world that expects females to be naturally socially adept, they set about learning social rules through imitation and channeling their autistic traits into behaviors that make them less visible.” Based on suggestions from Cynthia Kim, Samantha Craft, and Rudy Simone, there are a few key traits often shared by autistic people who are not men. For example, we may have less clearly “unusual” special interests, including ones often understood to be “traditionally feminine obsessions,” such as makeup or horses. We may tend towards being philosophical, deep thinkers. We may use our imaginations as tools of dissociation and escape, where the traditional male-based model suggests that autistics have little imaginative capacity. We may be more verbal or hyperlexic. We may also be better at faking social interaction through imitation, which means that our social difficulties may be more difficult to recognize. (Of course, these are by no means rules: our special interests may very well be video games or airplanes, many of us are nonverbal, and some of us are not very good at imitation at all. As the saying goes, “If you’ve met one autistic, you’ve met one autistic.”)

Yet, it is not just autistic women who experience autism in ways that do not fit gender-biased diagnostic criteria. There exists a significant population of autistic people who do not fit into gender at all.

The Increasingly Visibility of Trans and Autistic Intersections

It is well-known that autistic people are more likely to be transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, or otherwise gender non-conforming. The Autistic Women’s Network (AWN) changed their name to Autistic Women’s and Nonbinary Network (AWNN) in 2018, to “express the ongoing inclusive nature of our work…[and] that of the members of the community we serve” (Falk, 2018). We have coined non-binary gender labels like “autigender” (candidlyautistic, 2017) and “gendervague” (Brown, 2016) to describe gender feelings that are unique to people with our neurotype.

Autistic people are so much more likely than the average neurotypical to be transgender or gender non-conforming that both autism professionals and gender professionals have noticed the overlap, which has led to an increasing amount of research on their interaction. One study performed at a gender dysphoria clinic reported that 23.1% of its gender dysphoric patients had “possible, likely, or very likely” Asperger’s syndrome (Shumer et al., 2014). A study drawing from an autistic population found that 5.4% of autistic participants exhibited parent-reported gender-variant traits, as opposed to up to 0.7% in a control group; the same study suggests we are 7.59 times more likely to express gender variance (Strang et al., 2014). Another study, drawing this time from a population of binary-identified transgender participants, found that 5.5% of participants met criteria for an autism diagnosis (Pasterski et al., 2014); a similar study put the number at 7.8% (de Vries, 2010).

Many studies report significantly greater gender variance or expressed gender non-conformity in populations assigned female at birth (AFAB). One such study reported that 22% of women and 8% of men in their autistic sample expressed feelings of gender non-conformity (Dewinter et al., 2017). Other sources, especially anthologies, have an abundance of autistic transgender women assigned *male* at birth (Hendrickx, 2015). This difference could potentially be attributed to transmisogyny, which results in, among other complications, greater invisibility and inaccessibility of AMAB nonbinary identities, in comparison to AFAB nonbinary identities.

It is extremely important to note that these formal studies almost exclusively discuss gender-dysphoric, binary transgender people. Since a great deal of autistic people self-identify as non-binary, and many of us are non-dysphoric, it is likely that our refusal to comply with cisgender hegemony is even more common than existing literature has uncovered. More research should be conducted with nonbinary, non-dysphoric, and non-medicalized identities in mind.

The correlations are clear, yet there is little to no understanding of the reasons behind them. Many autistics, echoed by researchers including John Strang, have named a "social perspective that includes less focus on status, reputation, authority, social norms, and opinions of others" (Sparrow). An autistic trans woman puts this more simply: "Maybe...autistic people aren't influenced by others and are more likely to just be themselves" (Hendrickx, 157). Max Sparrow (they/he) points out two other significant potentialities, each deeply rooted in the autistic experience. Firstly, they point out the autistic tendencies towards "curiosity and adaptive learning (...often pathologized as perseveration and obsession)", traits which naturally lead us to question gender roles and norms, to pursue self-exploration, and to experiment and study gender. They also suggest that to be autistic living in a world that was not designed for us to live in prepares us to more easily understand and embrace other marginalized parts of our selves. In their words, "An autistic life is training ground for accepting and embracing gender variance and vice versa" (Sparrow).

Autistic anthologies and self-help books touch on gender non-conformity over and over again, pointing to its relevance in so many of our lives. Yet, increasingly, writing about gender non-conformity by autistic authors reveals that our experience of gender may be less about not conforming to the norm, and more about an experience that is uniquely our own: uniquely autistic.

A Uniquely Autistic Gender

Because autism is so deeply a part of who we are, our genders are not just inscribed by autism: our genders are autistic in and of themselves. The way that we understand, create, shape, talk about, perform, and otherwise "do" gender is just as autistic as we are. One autistic trans woman said, "[My sexuality / gender] are part of my neurotype that makes me, me. I don't think they can be separated…" (Hendrickx, 157).

One of the biggest indicators that this is true is a reflection of our lack of understanding of - or lack of patience for - allistic social norms, which many of us consider to include gender. Max Sparrow writes, “I am, and always have been, unclear on what ‘gender’ is. I only believe that it exists because everyone around me tells me that it does[...] I don’t see gender, I can’t feel gender, I have no concept of myself as possessing gender but I don’t feel agender, because that would require sensing gender in other people which I also do not” (Sparrow, 2017). Sometimes we describe the gender we do as mostly performative: “For some of us here, our lives, outlook, and behavior don’t have much of a sense of gender at all. I myself live a somewhat femme life but it feels in some sense detachable, like a costume. I[...] most clearly perceive the world in a non-gendered way” (Kearns Miller, 38).

Even those of us who don’t self-identify as non-binary report an experience of gender that is distinctly removed from the binary. “I have never felt female or able to be ‘one of the girls’” (Simone, 62) is a common refrain, often followed up by reports of experiences that are definitionally equivalent to nonbinary identities, including bigender (“I actually feel as if I am half male and half female” (Simone, 62)), genderfluid, genderless (Hendrickx, 154; Meyerding, 157), and third gender (Hendrickx, 154). In her self-help book *Aspergirls* (2010), author Rudy Simone takes a Jungian approach to the same binary-transcending concepts: “...most if not *all* Aspergirls have similar perceptions about gender. Our anima and animus seem to be of equal influence and power” (62).

We also express a disconnection from our gendered bodies in the same way we might experience a general disconnection from our kinesic and kinesthetic senses. One autistic woman said, “[My body is] like a tool. I think that’s the simplest way to describe it. A vessel that I use to interface with the world around me, or at least try to” (Hendrickx, 152). Other autistic women have talked about their experience of their body as disconnected from its sociological function: “I never learned to see my body as a woman’s body in the sense that a woman’s body is an actor in socio-sexual relations. My body is the support structure for me, my intellect, my memories, my sensory experiences. If it has a gender, that gender lives on the outside, not in here where it would make a difference to how I feel or see the world (except in so far as I am shaped by how my gender causes the world to see and feel about me)” (Meyerding, 165-166).

Many autistic people self-report a distaste for gender roles, and might express that they feel more in common with men (Griffin, 2016). It’s possible that this is because men have fewer social expectations than women, just as it is possible that some of us identify as transmasculine. Others, though, don’t feel disconnected from their womanhood at all: “When I say I don’t feel like a woman, people are likely to assume that I mean I feel like a man. I don’t. Never have. Nor do I feel alienated by my body, its female shapes, its female cycles” (Meyerding, 157).

In many cases, our autism seems to negate our gender in the eyes of allistic society, casting even cisgender and binary-identified autistic women as “other” from an external point of view. Simone’s *Aspergirls* (2010) includes the quote: “In high school, girls treated me like I was something else, not boy, not girl, just an *it*” (62). The same sentiment of objectification is repeated elsewhere: “I don’t feel like a woman. I just feel like a ‘thing’, other and alien”

(Hendrickx, 155). In *Women From Another Planet?*, Mary Margaret Yearwood says, “The boys would say ‘You aren’t like other girls. You don’t cry when you get hurt, so you are better than other girls, but you aren’t a boy, so you are a Mary Margaret.’ Of course it was lonely being given a category to myself and it taught me to hate my gender” (Kearns Miller, 38).

“The point is, though,” Jean Kearns Miller says, “that this is a way of having gender” (38). If she is right, then what *is* autistic gender, and what opportunities of meaning do autistic genders create?

Methods

I was able to get in touch with Dr. Dora Raymaker and Dr. Christina Nicolaidis of the Academic Autism Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education (AASPIRE). They shared some past research materials and a forthcoming publication entitled “AASPIRE Practice-Based Guidelines for the Inclusion of Autistic Adults in Research as Co-Researchers and Study Participants,” and I was able to talk with Dr. Raymaker about my study design at length, brainstorming ideas for interview questions and accessible procedures. I also took inspiration from communication methods discussed by Jean Kearns Miller and others in their anthology *Women From Another Planet?* (2003).

One of the most important parts of the process for me was creating an accessible online consent form. Providing the option to give consent online removes many of the steps that might prevent autistic people from accessing participation, due to executive dysfunction. It can also allow for other forms of accessibility, such as altering text size or contrast.

I allowed participants to choose their own method of communication: synchronous or asynchronous, and verbal or non-verbal. All participants for this round of data collection chose nonverbal communication; three chose to do so synchronously (instant messaging) and one chose to do so asynchronously (email). Within the consent form, I provided an outline of the steps that would follow if they chose to participate in the study, to accommodate autistic people who feel more comfortable with familiarity. Indeed, another benefit of using an online form was the ability to streamline the process, so the only information that participants had to process was the information relevant to their own selected method of communication. Finally, participants also had access to a savable or printable document that outlined these steps and their rights, so they could access that information whenever they wanted to.

I focused on asking questions that would elicit stories, memories, or sensory information. Some of these questions included things like, “When did you first realize you were not cisgender?” or “What are the best things about being autistic?” or “How did you do gender when you were younger?” I wrote questions I might ask in a document that was shared with participants in advance, since many autistic people benefit from having plenty of time to process information and gather their thoughts for response. Ultimately, though, the conversations were only loosely structured; I used the list of questions as inspiration to guide the flow of the conversation, rather than as an interview schedule.

Finally, it was important to me that I, as the researcher, established a precedent of authenticity and openness. Not all autistic people feel most comfortable speaking Standard English, including myself, so I chose to speak in the way I am most accustomed to, using nearly all lowercase text and subverting grammatical norms when it served the purpose of communicating emotion or autistic perspective. I also used grammatical structures that have been established (by largely autistic communities) on the Internet in order to convey emotion without visual data, including emoticons, shared abbreviations, sentence-case words to indicate Emphasis, and the textualization of non-verbal physical cues (e.g. "[shrugs]" indicating nonchalance). Participants did not use these linguistic strategies uniformly, but did share in some of them. When quoting interviews, I present the text as-is in order to authenticate these nonverbal dialects; when punctuation or capitalization appears missing or incorrect, it is intentional.

Participants

Because I am engaged in autistic and transgender communities, I was able to reach out on my personal social media, asking for people to participate in interviews: "if you feel like your gender is impacted by being autistic, or like your gender *is* autistic, then I would love to talk to you!" In a short time, I recruited four participants, though I would like to recruit others in the future to collect more data.

I specified that participants should identify as autistic, but did not require participants to have a diagnosis. Excluding those without a diagnosis would exclude people who do not match the typical profile of autism, which, as discussed, is heavily influenced by sexism and ableism. It would also exclude people who are marginalized in ways that may make professional diagnosis less likely or more inaccessible (e.g. are non-White, poor, et cetera). Furthermore, to legitimize the medicalization of autism would be going against the foundational theories I am working with: neurodiversity theory, which posits that an autistic identity can be claimed without professional legitimization, and rejects the pathology paradigm; and queer theory, which suggests that liberationism, not assimilationism, is both the best path to living authentically and the best path to justice. Finally, this study seeks to discuss autistic identity, so it makes sense that I sought autistic-identified, rather than necessarily diagnosed, participants. Relatedly, I asked that participants see their autism as neurodivergence, not disorder.

I asked that participants identify as one or more of the following: transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, and / or gender non-conforming. This allowed for the potential inclusion of participants who identified as cisgender and gender non-conforming, but still felt that their gender was in some way related to their autism, a perspective I would have been interested in hearing about. All participants, however, identified as nonbinary, although their full identity was often more complex, either inexpressible or more complicated than could be communicated through a few words.

I also asked that participants identify as woman-proximal or girl-proximal, a label that describes people who identify with womanhood or girlhood in some way, though they may not necessarily identify *as* women or girls. This choice was more difficult for me to make, as I understand that there are nonbinary autistic people who do not identify with girlhood or womanhood whatsoever. Yet, from the literature and from my own lived experience, I am conscious of the issues of unequal access to transness, as transmisogyny tends to limit the ability of those assigned male at birth to access non-male genders, and of unequal access to autism, as divergence from the masculinized profile of autism may limit the ability of those assigned female at birth to access autistic identity. People who identify with womanhood or girlhood are also more likely, in general, to reject dominant norms, and therefore have queer notions of gender and autism.

All participants were over the age of 18 for consent reasons. I did not exclude participants who lived outside of the United States, as long as they felt comfortable speaking English with me. Still, all but one of my participants lived in the United States; the one non-American lives in the Netherlands and speaks both Dutch and English fluently. I spoke with this participant about the context in which the Netherlands views autism in their experience, and did some research on my own to solidify my understanding.

Name	Age	Gender	Pronouns	Race	Sexuality	Communication
Sylvia	24	N/A	she/they	White	aromantic asexual lesbian	synchronous nonverbal
Alethia	21	non-binary	they/them	White, Jewish	bi	synchronous nonverbal
Lin	24	non-binary	she/they	East Asian	lesbian	asynchronous nonverbal
Zephyr	21	nonbinary	they/them	White	pan	synchronous nonverbal

A Note on Nonverbal Communication

Hegemonic ableism dictates that verbal communication is privileged over and valued more highly than nonverbal communication. We marginalize nonverbal communication (even the name “alternative communication” is othering of nonverbality), and question the richness of nonverbal data. Yet, for many people who are nonverbal or semiverbal, the data they are able to provide when speaking in the way that is most comfortable for them is likely to be much richer than if they were forced to verbalize. Autistic people who typically communicate comfortably through text, or another nonverbal medium, are much more likely to be able to convey the

nuance qualitative researchers seek when permitted and encouraged to communicate through their chosen medium.

When working with nonverbal and semiverbal people, it is vital to recognize that the privilege and value ascribed to verbality can hurt both our participants and results. One of my participants initially signed up as a verbal participant, but let me know in the process of setting up our interview that they were actually much more comfortable with text, and had only signed up as verbal because they knew that researchers tended to prefer verbal data. I share this to illustrate the importance of demonstrating enthusiasm and even preference for nonverbal communication: it is our responsibility as researchers (who value both rich and accurate data, and the comfort and safety of our participants) to push back against the idea that verbal communication is or should be the norm, in academic research and in general.

I suspect that, like me, many autistic researchers who are themselves semiverbal may already have an understanding of how to glean this nuance from nonverbal data. I encourage allistic researchers interested in working with the autistic population to become familiar with our emotive textual languages before doing qualitative research with us. Autistic people frequently make use of forums and blogs; allistics will find it helpful to read these, or even participate in them, if the rules of the space state that they are welcome to do so.

I look forward to a future where information on nuance in nonverbal qualitative research is widely available, and to a future where we can determine best practices for reducing the impact of verbal privilege.

Results

As I had expected, the data I gathered echoed many of the themes I discovered in writing about autistic people who are not men, and about autistic gender in general.

It was also richly, powerfully, and enthusiastically autistic. For example, multiple participants expressed identities characterized by sensory experience, in ways that allistic or cis people would not:

> "my gender feels a little like an absence? but not an uncomfortable one, if that makes sense -- a warm little nothing, like laying in a sunbeam in some overgrown ruins. a little quiet space" (Alethia)

> S: "probably at my core i'm / hm / im unsure if theres a word for it! / if the void is peach-colored and the consistency of foam"
> R: "like, bubble foam? / or the solid material foam?"
> S: "like on coffee / a little thicker"

Sylvia also described her gender as "the taste of peach candy," "a transient cloud-looking substance," and "humidity in the air after leaving a shower." (I personally describe my own gender as "soft grey fog" and "the feeling of slipping into a big, warm, comfortable hoodie.") One metaphor we used in conversation to conceptualize the genderfluidity Sylvia experiences

was that of a palette of paint: different genders represented different colors on a palette, and like colors of paint, “usually i can still identify the components” but they could also be mixed into new ‘colors.’

Yet, “at times,” Sylvia said, “i dont really feel any way in particular, like an undipped brush.” Many of my participants expressed similar concepts of their genders as vague, uncertain, and difficult to explain. Although they said the established nonbinary identity closest to how they feel would be agender, Alethia said, “i tend to just call myself non-binary because sometimes it feels really hard to put into words exactly.” Sylvia shared this feeling of inexpressibility, saying, “the gender stuff ive got kind of slips out of your hands if you try to grab hold,” while Lin characterized hers as more mysterious and faint: “my gender right now is..... a mystery. hint of hint of girl. like lacroix”

> “i would definitely say that [my gender is autistic], in the sense that an allistic person would not experience this in the same way i do / they would probably parse it as something theyre Uncertain about, like a puzzle to be solved, where im reasonably certain that / that uncertainty Is a defining aspect of my gender experience. the sort of floating along feeling” (Sylvia)

> “my concept of being trans is based less on the idea of ‘this gender doesnt fit me but this one does’ and more ‘this idea feels a little more solid when i use it, ill keep you posted if i find something better’ / its like carving ice / i dont know what its gonna look like when i get there completely, but im refining it” (Sylvia)

Participants also described an enduring sense of difference, one that they could not separate from their autistic identity. “i feel like in some way i was aware my gender was different too, but because they’re so interconnected to me i thought it was part of me just being seen as Different in general,” Alethia said.

“Making It Easier”

“[...]it’s much easier to be comfortable with that differentness when I’m already so different,” Zephyr said, echoing Max Sparrow’s suggestion that being autistic is a “training ground” for defying gender norms. As I discussed earlier, Sparrow asserts that natural autistic curiosity leads us to explore gender more frequently and deeply than allistics. Alethia confirmed this, saying that autistic people are more likely to disregard gender expectations because “the way society and gender norms are set up are so overwhelmingly tied to how non-autistic ppl see and interact with the world.” They continued, “as an autistic people it can be hard to grasp or get a coherent idea of gender and what it means? like other societal norms, a lot of it you’re just supposed to Understand, without anyone ever fully explaining them or laying out the Rules, which[...] i feel leads to questioning and examining your gender and how it works more than a non-autistic person ever might.”

Sylvia and Lin both agreed that they wouldn’t be the same gender if they weren’t autistic. “then again, I also definitely wouldn’t be, Me, if I weren’t autistic,” Lin added. The idea of

autism as inseparable from the self informed and coexisted with the idea of autism as inseparable from one's own gender - and here, the phrasing "*one's own*" is vital.

Understanding of Self and Others as Unique

Perhaps one of the most well-known "deficits" of autism is that we "lack a Theory of Mind." In other words, autistic people are supposedly well-known to lack an understanding that other people have different needs, desires, interests, knowledge, and consciousness than their own. Many autistic people have vocally challenged this theory, saying that autistic people are *more* likely to be aware of the fact that other people have different minds, because we are so often willfully misunderstood by allistic people.

My participants were deeply conscious of the fact that others did not share their minds. Sylvia put it best when they said, "to be autistic and interact with others is to understand that experiences are not inherently universal." Because the cognition of others is so different from our own, she explained, she often felt like "the things i think and the way i think them are inherently unrelatable." But, they added, "that feeling is so much smaller with other autistics." Alethia echoed this feeling of disconnection from allistic people. "i feel like it's also really difficult to connect to non-autistic people the way i do for autistic people sometimes, because a lot of them demand i engage them on their terms and won't be willing to adjust for my neurotype the way i do for theirs," they said.

Linguistic patterns followed this tacit understanding of the uniqueness of individual experience. Alethia repeatedly used phrases such as "i feel like" and "in my experience", often emphasizing that the thoughts they conveyed were their own, and they could not speak for others. Lin and Sylvia echoed this pattern, though to a lesser extent, frequently using words like "personally."

Interestingly, Alethia and Sylvia both shared an understanding that their gender was something for themselves. Sylvia explained, "i dont have to Bare My Entire Self to everyone who comes in contact with me / it can be a privilege to know me in my entirety / even just that a few people do is enough for me to not feel alone." Alethia said, "i feel like my personal gender is just… kind of for me?" They did not feel a pressing need to be out to more people than they currently are; it was enough to know that they understand themselves, and that they were not alone.

Sylvia also emphasized that understanding her gender was the key to avoiding misgendering. In general, they said, "i think im very disconnected from the emotional ties people tend to have to pronouns / if you get Me then whatever." I agreed, sharing that I felt the same: using they/them pronouns is often, more than "correctly gendering" me, a "shortcut" to get people to understand that I am not a man or a woman. Although Sylvia uses she/her pronouns, she still feels misgendered when they are used by someone who does not know about her gender (specifically, she said, "about the vagueness that pervades my sense of self"). "i can be in a place where a pronoun works and is fine, but [if] the person using it i Know does not know a thing

about what i am," she said, then this constitutes misgendering. They explained that this was tied to what they described as the "loneliness" of feeling as though they were inherently incomprehensible: "its that concept, of not being known and heard and understood, that hurts more than anything." Like many of the prominent figures of the autistic rights movement, Sylvia tends to gravitate towards that central theme of *voice*: being heard and understood.

Performance and Exhaustion

One of the side effects of this "inherent incomprehensibility," especially when paired with a society that demands excellent social skills, especially from people who aren't men, is a constant pressure to perform. "our whole lives are performance," Sylvia said, referring not only to performances of gender but to performances of conformity in an allistic-centered world.

For some of us, performance can be a welcome structure. Alethia described being isolated in their childhood, and spending most of their time on roleplay forums. For them, roleplay was a safe haven, a supportive place to explore themself: "i always found character creation to be incredibly fun, being able to slip on different identities and personalities at will, but it took… an almost embarrassingly long time to realise i could do the same with gender." Still, when they realized it was a possibility, they said, "i simultaneously thought 'you can do that?' and 'you can be that?' at once with... almost reverence, really, like everything suddenly just felt Right." Once they had a template to work with, they were able to explore their gender through the structured performance of roleplay. They've been able to view the way they are treated by people unaware of their gender as a positive form of performance, too:

> "it feels like playing pretend in a way. like i'm an actor playing a role, and my real name and pronouns are who i am behind the stage" (Alethia)

Few people, however, had access to structured spaces in which performance was encouraged as an exploratory tool. Instead, they expressed frustration with social requirements to perform gender. Sylvia said, "im already busy trying to pretend to be a Normal Person, and now i have to be A Girl on top of that?" Lin said, more succinctly, "gender sucks!! i dont get it!!"

Performance was ultimately rarely worth the toll it took. Sylvia said, "the thing is i might have been concerned with trying to do it / to Be A Girl Right / but it was too much along with everything else." They struggled with gendered expectations:

> "well ive been toying with the traditional femme/butch dichotomy and i think for a while i pushed harder into the femme side of it than actually fit me / i was going for floaty chiffon summer dress / but im, like, overalls / pajama pants and a t shirt / i used 'slob femme' or 'cozy femme' for a while as a result of not fitting the mold all too much / depending on how i was feeling at the time about my inability to perform femininity oops" (Sylvia)

Sylvia and Zephyr both tried to perform femininity "appropriately" when they were younger, with painful results. Sylvia described "a matter of not performing it right. constantly

feeling Off when it came to trying to be seen as a girl," whereas Zephyr said, "I pretty much blamed my entire inability to connect with peers on the fact that I was unable to correctly perform femininity." For autistic people, who don't get the allistic social rules that determine "correct" performances, and who have less energy and cognitive resources to devote to those performances, attempting to perform "accurately" can be incredibly draining, and can contribute to low self-esteem, depression, and burnout:

> "I felt like there was something wrong with me, and it made me feel the need to blend in, to 'become a girl'. I could never seem to do it quite right though, never could do it the way girls my age could. Whenever I was in a situation among female peers, I just constantly felt like there was something they understood that I didn't. [...]There was just this message about 'what girls are supposed to be' and I was trying really hard to become that image and it just wasn't working." (Zephyr)

> "By the time I had settled into middle school, I had realized that this wasn't making my peers like me any more than they already did, and gave up on my aggressive portrayal of the gender I thought I was supposed to be and just stopped maintaining my appearance all together. During this stage in my life, I had no confidence in myself and was bitter towards the world. I hated my assigned gender, including other members of it…" (Zephyr)

This concept of limited energy and resources to devote to gender came up over and over again. The following exchange between myself and Sylvia introduces an idea of gender as a process that requires cognitive energy:

> S: "the feeling of being Me, Original Ver. is kind of a dissociative one / usually happens when im like, engaged in something that occupies my attn [fully as in hyperfocus]"
> R: "it somewhat sounds like, you are so occupied with the subject of focus that you don't have the mental energy to spare for gender / which is interesting to me because it introduces this idea of like / gender being a mental process that, to function, needs resources and energy allocated to it"
> S: "YES / EXACTLY / the thing i said, about energy being at a fucking premium? / That"

Lin proposes a sort of autistic cognitive exhaustion with the number of restrictions, rules, and expectations placed upon gender, especially for people expected to perform as women:

> "I think afab autistic people are more likely to Not Give A Shit [about gender…] because the kinds of rules and structures placed upon our body are so Many that like. it's hard to parse them all" (Lin)

While allistic women in feminist scholarship have long described exhaustion from the requirements of performing femininity, it seems likely that autistic people expected to perform the same tasks might experience heightened distress and discomfort, more intensely and more swiftly than allistic people for whom expressions of frustration and pain may come much later in life: when they run out of patience, versus when they run out of the cognitive ability to maintain their current state.

Disconnection from Body

As I have mentioned already, many gender non-conforming autistic writers have discussed viewing their bodies as tools, or objects through which to interface, however shoddily, with the world (Meyerding, 2003). Autistic people in general commonly experience differences in bodily awareness and connectedness. Echoing this, my conversational partners expressed varying degrees of disconnection from their bodies.

Alethia outright does not associate their body with their gender. “i don’t consider my gender really tied to my physical body because i don’t really associate myself with it either,” they said. Since Alethia grew up relatively isolated and mostly socialized via online roleplay forums, they said, as a result, “how i see myself - and by extension my gender - is very much… an amalgam of concepts and aesthetics.” Like other autistic people who view their bodies as objects of purpose, Alethia said, “to me it’s more like… something i use to interact with the physical world? sometimes i feel a little like i’m just possessing it rather than inhabiting it.”

Sylvia also brought up something of a disconnection with their body. “im comfy visualizing myself as how i actually look,” she said, but certain imagery (“a transient cloud-looking substance”) still “resonates” as a description of her self. Other than that, “i live in the body that i live in,” they said. Lin also feels relatively neutral about her body, saying, “its mostly when i think abt how most ppl will see my body and use it to Gender Me” that it feels bad.

Relation to Girlhood

Though all participants identified themselves as girl-proximal, each had a different understanding of how this identification applied to them.

Sylvia expressed a feeling of familiar disconnection about gender when she was younger: “it didnt Hurt me to be called a girl, even if it felt off,” she said. “like, i felt off all the time about everything else Anyway, so.” Overall, though, Sylvia said, “i think autistic people are more likely to feel disconnected from their agab / i think it depends on their circumstances whether they are allowed the space to actually investigate those feelings.” She was referring to the issue of unequal access to gender, often due to transmisogyny; AMAB autistic people may feel the same kind of disconnect with their gender, yet find themselves unable to express it.

Lin also expressed a sense of disconnect or confusion from the gender she was assigned at birth:

> “I didn’t [experience gender] until I was like, Made Aware of it? like everyone was like ‘you are Girl’ and I was just like ‘sure okay’ and didn’t really think much of it until I was introduced to like, gendered toys and how like at school sometimes theyd divide us up into Girls and Boys for like, sports. even then, I don’t think I really ‘got’ it, and I still kinda don’t?” (Lin)

It was a relief for Lin to understand that "my lifelong mental detachment from the concept of 'womanhood' was cuz I wasn't one, at least not Completely."

For Sylvia, her present-day identification with girlhood is a matter of convenience and familiarity. They phrased this in the form of a favorite echolalia:

> "everyone: youre a girl
> me: i guess that sounds right. i dont know enough about [MY SELF] to dispute it" (Sylvia)

"literally my gender experience is just me being like '.....oh ok'," she said. Because one of their strongest autistic traits is decision fatigue and finding comfort in being given direction, they thought it likely that being given a "direction" to go in - girlhood - was comfortable and reduced the cognitive stress of identity formation for her.

Lin speculated that their relationship to girlhood was partly familiarity and partly a disinterest in masculinity:

> "I do still identify with girlhood somewhat, but like fuck if I know why??? I guess it is just something familiar, but some of it is also like…. I'm not a boy in any way I don't think? [...]being a boy just like, never interested me?? idk just being somewhat girl-aligned feels right, like I'm not sure how to explain it, really…" (Lin)

Specifically, Lin theorized that her girl-proximity might have something to do with being a lesbian. She mentioned that her appreciation for and love of girls was probably significant, but also cited a passage from Kabi Nagata's autobiographical manga *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* where the author describes being repulsed at the idea of being gendered if she were with a man: "I was excessively afraid of being defined as a woman… before I was seen as myself."

Alethia had a fondness and sort of nostalgia for girlhood, saying, "even if i do not identify as a girl now, it's how i was raised so i still feel a deep connection to it even if it's not who i am anymore. i'm not one now, but when i think of my younger self i still see a little girl, you know? my experiences with girlhood still informed and continue to inform who i am today." They added, "i'm also not out to my family because non-binary genders are kind of a difficult subject in my native language, so i still live life perceived as a girl a lot."

Importantly, multiple participants expressed a preference for the term "girl" over the term "woman."

> "I think I might be more comfortable with 'girl' than 'woman' because 'girl' is like, the younger, more incomplete stage if that makes sense? it feels more nebulous than woman." "it's just sort of the sense that I'm not like, done growing and/or maturing yet? even though i am technically a Legal Adult, I still feel like I'm not like…. who I'm supposed to be yet… [...]I don't quite feel like I'm 'there' yet?" (Lin)

> "i am Not A Woman / the concept of age is very very weird to me. i have no idea if it has to do with autism stuff or trauma stuff or WHAT but / i dont feel like, the degree of competence or self sufficiency that calling myself a Grown Woman implies" (Sylvia)

Community as Liberatory

All of my participants expressed strongly positive feelings towards a nonbinary autistic community. They consistently credited their introduction to the community as something that changed their lives, and often cited their interactions with other nonbinary autistics as some of the most fulfilling they have.

> "the ones i met over the internet who helped me figure out i was autistic helped me gain a deeper understanding of myself and wrestle a lot better with the negative feelings of self-loathing i'd been struggling with after getting bullied for being different so long. it showed me i was not alone, and i was not wrong, and that my autism doesn't make me unworthy of love or respect / those i met after, especially offline, helped me with my fear of meeting with people face to face and my urges to suppress anything that could make me visibly different. [...]whenever they call me by my name it feels like a happy buzz all over :)" (Alethia)

Zephyr found the autistic community to be helpful after a professional told them they were "too good at expressing [themself], and didn't appear to struggle with socializing." They said they "came out of there really confused" but were able to connect with autistic people who helped reorient them. The experience has left them somewhat nervous about identifying as autistic, but looking at their experiences through a lens of autism makes the most sense, and talking with other autistics has helped them to feel more comfortable in their ability to claim that lens. Sylvia shared a similar sentiment: "that outside validation has been pretty helpful for me in both senses, to see that im allowed to call myself something if it helps me."

Echoing the sentiments of other queer people who find value, validation, and joy in their communities, Zephyr said, "Finding my neurodivergent and lgbt identity has really opened up a whole new world of connections with others. [...] I have the best discussions of gender with my nonbinary autistic friends lol." Lin echoed this: "I'm able to talk abt being nb autistic like, naturally?"

Queering

Participants brought up other connections with queerness, too. Many of these connections revolved around the ability to be different and proud of that difference:

> "A lot of [our discussions] revolve around not fitting in anywhere and making a community around just that- not fitting in. Being able to identify ourselves as an outsider to gender, an outsider to neurotypical society, allows us to express our pain and to find joy for ourselves." (Zephyr)

> "to claim autism, for me, was something i was a little bit apprehensive about, but mainly just because i didnt think i was allowed to. i could 'function' enough that like, it wasnt For me … the best way i can describe this is that i viewed orientation+gender stuff as one facet of my self, and my ability to cope with tasks and with stress and the way i saw the world as another / in the latter category, once i got past that initial apprehension that i mentioned, being able to say 'im autistic' never felt like anything but taking a breath after being submerged in the ocean / because the choice for me was never between being neurotypical and being autistic / it was between being autistic and being just. nebulously, incurably Worse than the people around me / it was a life preserver / so i guess… did knowing about being trans help you accept being autistic, Not Specifically, but it was another piece of myself i could pin down, and having that meant that learning i could be autistic was not as much of an upheaval of my sense of self" (Sylvia)

Participants also brought up that accepting their difference allowed them to act intentionally in ways that allowed them to be happy, comfortable, and authentic. At this point in their identity journey, Zephyr felt that "I just tend to act however I'd like in all spaces." Although they haven't always felt comfortable stimming (short for 'self-stimulation,' a physical form of autistic expression and catharsis), they said, "Learning about what stims were helped me find new, healthier stims and allowed me consciously to do them to calm myself down." Ultimately, Zephyr said, "I don't know if [a place for me] exists [in this world], but if it doesn't I feel I have gained the tools to carve it out of my environment." This intentional "carving" is, I believe, comparable to the intentional act of "queering."

On "Gender Differences"

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not address the way that my participants talked about "gender differences" in autism. Unsurprisingly, they had little to no patience for the usual way such "differences" are discussed.

> "i feel like the way our brain develops is tied to our own personality and neurotypes and through how we are socialized and the things we experience, not an insurmountable difference [of biology…] if it's presenting differently in men and women, that's only because they're taught to hide or not hide certain parts of their autism based on how their environment raises them (with all the gender norms and cissexism that come with that). i don't think autism is tied to maleness at all." (Alethia)

Yet, Alethia points out, "i feel like things are more often researched in boys in general -- since they're often seen as the 'default' human, especially white boys." Sylvia agreed: "allistics have an image of an autistic person in their heads. and its a guy."

Alethia expressed frustration with the differential treatment of autistics of different assigned genders: "at least in my experience when i was a young girl -- i was not allowed to stim, while boys my age were allowed to express their feelings through their bodies much more freely[...] i also had a much bigger pressure to not talk about my [special interests] at length, or

to not read all the time, or to not be a ‘know it all’ and keep talking about things i liked over and over where the boys i knew were praised for having interests they were passionate about.”

Still, Sylvia was firm on the importance of respecting our autistic brothers: they bear the weight of ableism too, albeit in different ways, and part of the reason autism is seen as “different between men and women” is that ableism is applied differently to each group. “it is a matter of everyone pushing to try to be seen as allistic Lest We Bear The Consequences,” they said, “but some people are pushed and prodded and Corrected more than others / its a different kind of shitty[...] to not have been Told [about social rules] bc people just assume you dont have the capacity to do xyz / its like the difference between someone considering you a Lost Cause / and someone pushing you past whatever limits you may have / both are awful / but they make a person behave differently, when applied”

Discussion

Autistic people, especially those who actively identify as nonbinary, do experience uniquely autistic genders, created and shaped by our uniquely autistic bodybrains. Our tendency for sensory experience is reflected in the way we describe our genders, just as our dissociative tendencies often create genders experienced as uncertain and vague. As Max Sparrow and others have suggested, our experience of difference as both autistic people and nonbinary people leads to easier acceptance of both identities, and we understand these identities as inherently interconnected. As autistics, we are also intimately aware that other people may never understand these identities the way we do, leading us to place more weight on our own interpretations of gender than that of others.

Yet, being heard and understood as our authentic selves is a vital part of our happiness and security, as many autistic writers and activists have articulated. Performing gender can be especially exhausting for us; we feel “off” when we try to be who we are not, and it leads to feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, and burnout. For autistic people, it seems that gender is a cognitive process that takes energy and resources to accomplish, and we aren’t always able to run that process, which may be part of what leads to common experiences of genderlessness, neutral genders, or vague, uncertain genders. Another factor in this may be our disconnection and dissociation from our bodies, a phenomenon that is related both to our gender experiences and to our autistic kinesic and kinesthetic senses.

Among girl-proximal autistic people, we tend to feel connections to girlhood differently, often impacted by a familiar and comfortable history of girlhood, a sense of “direction” that lessens the confusion and strain of figuring out our identities. We might also be impacted by our experience of sexual and romantic attraction, something the queer community has long understood to interface with gender. Like many queer people, too, we find our communities to be incredibly, life-alteringly fulfilling. It is within communities of nonbinary autistic people that we have some of our most productive, joyful, truthful discussions. Being within these communities also gives us the confidence and resources to understand our identities in new ways, and to alter

ourselves and our worlds to make them more comfortable and accommodating for the neurodiverse people we really are.

Of course, especially in a population of neurodiversity-aligned people, we have strong opinions on gender bias in the diagnosis and interpretation of autism. Depending on how we grew up, we might have different experiences with being taken seriously or being allowed to present certain autistic traits.

Any and all of these revelations are rich with experiential data, and all deserve to be explored in much greater depth. A few of these conclusions, however, might be particularly impactful to people who work with the autistic community: our experiences of disconnection from our own genders as well as gender in general; an autistic reality of energy expenditure on gender processes, as well as experiences of distress and burnout from gender performance; and ways in which gendered forms of ableism and gender bias in autism research impact us as autistic people who are not men.

Furthermore, the possibility that we may identify with the gender we were assigned at birth despite not *being* that gender, simply because we were not given a non-binary "template" to work with, also has policy implications. A similar concept has been brought up by clinicians who work with pediatric patients (as in Summers, 2017): potentially-trans people would benefit from a proactive approach to providing the possibility of gender non-conformity and transness, in order to make informed choices about their body and its development. In short, it is the responsibility of people who work with children to tell them what options they have, but this is particularly true for people who work with autistic children. I suspect that receiving this "template" may be what many of us need in order to reduce discomfort and the impact of burnout from gender performance.

It is important to recognize that this study is incomplete. I only had the chance to interview four participants, most of whom were White, and all of whom were assigned female at birth. To gain a truly accurate understanding of autistic gender, I need to continue to gather data, especially from non-White and AMAB participants, and plan to do so.

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