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Author

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Publication Date

2017

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Understanding the Challenges and Opportunities Facing Students on the Autism spectrum at
UCLA: The Intersection of Autism, Ethnicity/Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation.

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree Master of
Arts in Education

by

Joseph Lewis Juarez

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Understanding the Challenges and Opportunities Facing Students on the Autism spectrum at
UCLA: The Intersection of Autism, Ethnicity/Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation.

by

Joseph Lewis Juarez

Master of Arts in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Connie L. Kasari, Chair

Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) students are the highest growing demographic of people with disabilities on college campuses and the rate is expected to continue to rise at a fast pace (Pinder-Amaker, 2013). Among the groups within the Autism Spectrum at a particular disadvantage are the ASCs students of Color who are disadvantaged by normativities including heteronormativity of gender and sexual orientation as well as other socially constructed inequities along with how they are mutually constitutive. Once these students arrive to the college scene, gaps of disparity begin to develop between Neurotypicals and ASCs in universities and within college classrooms (Gobbo, 2014). Those disparities amplify in their college lives as their academic, social, extracurricular, and material needs are neglected or not adequately addressed. Material needs are the basis from which one sustains themselves in

higher education in order to achieve the end of attaining their respective degrees. Such material needs are not only monetary but include access to other resources to meet their individual goals. In general, individuals on the Autism Spectrum face an array of difficulties navigating the complexities of college student life (Well et al. 2014). This project is a qualitative study to assess challenges regarding the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) of autism with other social identities in relation to social demographics of UCLA students on the Autism Spectrum. My approach was conducting personal interviews to find out what is getting in the way of improving the ACSs college experience and to make it more conducive for this population to enjoy student life and create safer campus spaces (Renn, 2000) for themselves.

The thesis of Joseph Lewis Juarez is approved.

Carola Suárez-Orozco

Sandra Graham

Connie L. Kasari, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

DEDICATION

I dedicate my master's thesis to the all of the most unheard and unknown marginalized individuals on the Autism Spectrum who have fallen into a systematic downward spiral of social injustice. Also, to those people of color on the spectrum in conjunction with other disadvantaged demographics who have been and are working to push back against such societal ills of power, privilege, and oppression.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
COMMITTEE PAGE	iv
DEDICATION	v
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	x
INTRODUCTION	1
My personal journey to this topic	1
Upbringing.....	3
Encouraging inclusion and adaptation for success	3
Transitioning to UCLA.....	5
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	14
Prevalence.....	14
Intersectionality.....	14
RESEARCH OBJECTIVE	17
METHODS	20
Procedures	20
Setting and Study Participants	21
Participants Included 5 UCLA Students	21
Coding and analysis	21
RESULTS.....	23
Findings Overview.....	23
Themes	24
Academic Challenges	25
Social Challenges	28
Institutional Challenges	32
Mental Health	39
Intersectionality.....	42
STUDY LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS	46
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	47

APPENDIX.....	51
REFERENCES	60

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.....	56
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LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	57
Figure 2	58
Figure 3	59

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The people whom I would like to thank and acknowledge. First, on the Human Development and Psychology (HDP) side chair Connie L. Kasari, my committee members Sandra Graham and Carola Suárez-Orozco. My colleagues, Consuelo D. Garcia for guiding me through the IRB process and her interview expertise with some of my participants, Alex Sturm for her feedback support on this thesis, HDP professors and TA's. On the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies (GSE&IS) side broadly I want to thank Amy Gershon who helped with addressing my departmental and financial concerns to complete grad school. Special gratitude goes to my interview participants who made a great effort to be a part of this research and endured hours long of personal inquiries and probing. It is of particular acknowledgement to those participants on the Autism Spectrum who went outside of their comfort zone to disclose extremely personal and sometimes painful experiences throughout their UCLA student life. These people on the spectrum are making a difference to the Autism community for their invaluable participation. People who were not directly involved in this project, my parents, Margaret and Jose Juarez and my biggest lifelong cheerleader my sister Gabrielle. To my elementary school psychologist, Jackie Lee who had the vision to treat me as an intelligent young student and not just to analyze me based on one size fits all autism assessments. To Robin Perencevic, who set academic strategies for the foundation of my early youth that allowed me to master the academic basics of learning. My elementary school principal, Alex Gasporra, who did not hesitate to accept me as a fully included student with my mainstream peers. And the rest of those in my life stages who directly and indirectly enabled me to have an education based on my own learning style. Lastly, I would like to thank all those

in my personal life who have stuck with me throughout everything and to this day have never forsaken me.

“Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference – those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older – know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths.” — Audre Lorde.

Introduction

My Personal Journey to This Topic

My interest and passion on the challenges and opportunities facing students on the Autism spectrum at UCLA has been incubated from a unique vantage point. I was diagnosed on the spectrum at age three at the Semel Institute at UCLA, attended UCLA as a biochemistry undergrad student, and then went on to pursue a Masters of Arts in Education in the Graduate School of Education. As such, I have had a first hand experience as an undergraduate and graduate student on the autism spectrum at UCLA. I am familiar with struggles of navigating many factors here along intersections of autism, ethnicity/race, gender, and sexual orientation.

During my graduate student career, I looked to find if there were any studies in higher education research like the one I am conducting for this project that is autism specific. I learned that this is the first research project of its kind at UCLA. As such, I am in a position to work for change regarding issues of autism and I recognize that have both a rare opportunity as well as a great deal of responsibility for participants. Because I have spent many years at UCLA I feel

particularly confident that my research approach and knowledge of how this campus operates is somehow accurate.

My childhood journey may be somewhat unusual. Though, I was diagnosed on the spectrum at the Semel Institute at three years of age, I did not know I was on the spectrum until the end of my senior year in high school. Growing up as an autistic child, my parents strategically planned that me being on the autism spectrum would not be disclosed to me until they knew I was going to graduate high school. Right after I was diagnosed, many doctors and educators said I would likely not be able to amount to much and I was unlikely to live a normal life. They communicated that by saying I would likely not be able to learn to talk, read or write, and that I would need to be placed in special education school. I was fortunate to have an elementary school psychologist who developed an assessment that would more accurately reflect my specific needs and who advocated on my behalf. Typically, children on the autism spectrum and other children with disabilities generally would be given universalized standardized assessments which may determine how they will be tracked in their K-12 education from the results of such assessments. However, she spent much time constructing an assessment for me so that I may be tracked on the right path that would give me the option to pursue postsecondary education. From there my elementary school case manager sealed the decision on my behalf to put me on the right track, Thus, from first grade through high school I was never placed in special education and have always received an education alongside my mainstream peers.

Towards the end of my senior year in high school, after I turned eighteen, the school psychologist at my high school disclosed to me that I am on the spectrum though my parents had planned for me to not know my diagnosis until that time they could be sure I would not

doubt my own capacities. While everything my parents planned worked out for me, I am not suggesting this would work for everyone.

Upbringing. I grew up in a heterosexually married upper middle class Latinx family. My parents emigrated from Mexico legally and obtained citizenship in 1987. I was born in the U.S. in 1990. Both of my parents are college educated. My dad has a B.S. in engineering and attended UCLA for his graduate studies and a career here in engineering in the U.S. My mom attended Chaffey College, later she transferred to California State University Northridge. Thus, I had the advantage of a stable family; nontraditional families with dependents with disabilities (including dependents on the autism spectrum) must juggle the multiple roles and stress and are at higher risk to fall into unemployment or depression. (Gottlieb, 1997). I once believed in the myth of meritocracy, which revolves around the idea that if one just works hard enough then we should be able to achieve upward mobility. While I did work hard to get to where I am today, the idea of meritocracy came true for me since I had the right accommodations and supports

Encouraging inclusion and adaptation for success. One barrier for people on the autism spectrum particularly in the context where they are dependents of families regards how there is much misinformation around autism and such misinformation is a barrier in part because it hinders access to appropriate accommodations and supports (Kasari & Smith, 2016). My parents were well informed and what they did not know they were able to find out as they were effective navigators of the system. My parents moved from Downey to Whittier when I was five years old since they knew that the education system there could adequately accommodate my academic needs and ensured that from first grade all through high school that I was never placed in special education. We lived there from when I was five until my

second year as a UCLA undergrad when I was nineteen years old. However, in Elementary School there were parents and teachers trying to deny me from being educated with my mainstream peers since they were convinced that autism might be contagious. As a result, a professional conducted a sensitivity training for parents and school personnel on autism to clarify such issues. Initially, one of my first-grade teachers was one of the people trying to deny me from being educated with my neurotypical peers. This is an example of how misguidance and/or fear can arouse bigotry which is not only significant on a micro level but plays into systems of inequity. Eventually this particular first grade teacher realized that one of her family members was on the spectrum and reached out to my parents via email for advice on how to help them. I believe I was able to persist in being educated alongside my neurotypical peers and excel because my parents were well educated on issues of autism and the effective support system we had. Instances of overt xenophobia and subtlety did not end up costing me in the long run since my parents had the means to enable me to be successful throughout all obstacles in my time in K-12. Though I was not aware that I am on the spectrum until the end of my senior year in high school, I sometimes questioned myself in regards to having differences. At some point in high school I did suspect that something was different with me since I had accommodations that my mainstream peers did not have and it was significantly harder for me to read people. These factors made me feel puzzled and I increasingly started to feel that something was different about me but I did not know what it was. However, those feelings luckily did not interfere with my academic performance and one of the things that helped me during my entire K-12 period was how my parents emphasized making my differences my strengths.

My parents were not focused on trying to make me like neurotypical because they believed that if one invests too much time in making their child(ren) fit a norm, then it can take away from them being able to thrive in their adult lives and possibly have negative implications for their long-term futures. What use is investing one's life in fitting a norm if it is not going to translate into living to their full potential?

My parents also supported my path toward postsecondary education by encouraging me to take part in extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities play a role in the higher education admission processes. One of my extracurricular activities that universities looked into even after I got admitted to UCLA was water polo. I started playing water polo when I was fourteen years old as a freshman at Whittier High School and after I tried it I fell in love with it. Since then it is a lifelong habit. My junior year in high school my sister and I joined Commerce Aquatics Water Polo Club based in the City of Commerce. It is a program that was and may still be predominantly Latinx as it was almost one hundred percent Latinx when I played, yet is one of the best youth water polo programs ranked in the U.S. When I traveled with the Commerce team there were times when I could hear them complaining about racism and though I did not interject there I thought they were just playing the race card in which due to multiple factors I failed to pick up on their lived realities of it since childhood. It was not until some point during the summer of 2011 when I took Chicano Studies 10B that I made the Latinx connection; then I realized that my Commerce teammates actually experienced racism and were justified to complain about their feelings.

Transitioning to UCLA. Going into undergrad at UCLA my parents got me to start getting familiar with CAE (Center for Accessible Education, formerly know as Office for Students with Disabilities, OSD) before the start of my freshman year. In fact, I was already

registered with CAE well before the beginning of my undergrad. I utilized their services and accommodations including extra time for exams, note-taking, Kurzweil 3000 reading software, van service, etc. It also helps that I had and continue to have great rapport with CAE personnel.

Towards the end of my senior year in high school I originally declared a biochemistry major since I liked biology in high school and I liked the idea of combining biology and chemistry. However, when taking natural sciences classes for the major in my first year I was not even passing them and ended up dropping all of them. It began in fall quarter when I took an introductory chemistry class and then when taking an introductory life sciences class in winter quarter it was even worse. I did significantly better in my three math classes though I did not get higher than a minimum-passing grade. At some point in my first year I was on academic probation. One of the factors holding me back was struggling to navigate multiple aspects of college life, one of them regarding what supports were there and how to use them. Another factor holding me back in my first year was an outside agency that failed to support me academically. We soon realized that the service was more of a babysitting service, where someone meet me and clock in until a certain time, that drained resources, as we needed to pay for the agency's parking. The agency suggested that I take classes from Santa Monica College (SMC) which in my case could have eventually brought me down rather than enabling me to be more successful in any way at UCLA.

Eventually in fall quarter of my second year I realized how inauthentic the biochemistry track was for me. That same quarter I was taking an introductory sociology class as part of my general elective (GE) requirements and after fall I realized I wanted to be a sociology major. I began to take that track but even though I already made the decision to

switch my major since then I could not even declare the sociology major until after winter quarter of my third year so my transcripts still listed me as a biochemistry major until then. In order to declare the major, I had to take two required classes which were an introductory research methods and statistics class. I took those classes in fall quarter but eventually dropped the quarter because I had a breakdown, partly since my medications were stolen so I retook those classes in winter quarter but it was even harder in winter.

For my research methods class, I had a particularly hard professor who was teaching for the first quarter compared to the professor teaching it the previous quarter who made it very conducive to pass his class. Since it was her first-time teaching, she was not familiar with the CAE system and was initially reluctant to give me accommodations I usually had for other classes. It helped that I had a good professor for Stats 10 which I passed in the B range and while I ended up passing both classes I got a better grade in stats. Had I not passed Stats 10 and Soc 20 by a certain period of time in my third year I would not have gotten to declare the sociology major. I began to go on reduced fee and I did summer school for most of my undergrad to complete units towards my graduation. Under reduced fee I would take ten units or less per quarter and still be considered a full time student. At least in the last two years of my undergrad I developed good relationships with professors which translated into better grades and good letters of recommendation that played a significant role in getting me into grad school and writing this thesis. For me it seemed much easier to sustain good relationships with professors than to sustain steady relationships with many of my friendships.

I recall going to Tarjan center events at UCLA, which are about clinical matters in regard to autism (i.e., etiology, genetics, physiology, interventions). During these clinical presentations made by neurotypical researchers, I realized that few individuals on the autism

spectrum present these sorts of matters about ourselves. Rather, they are always being presented by NTs (Neurotypicals). Such dominant narratives indirectly suggest NTs know us better than we know ourselves. I find these talks to be one-sided since they bring up ways to adhere to NT standards of development but not ways to draw strengths from our neurodivergence so that we may optimally be enabled to live successful and happy lives. It's not that these talks don't have their practical uses but unless people on the spectrum are incorporated into these fields we won't have much holistic perspectives of such fields when it comes to us.

I first learned what intersectionality is when I took women's studies 10 as a general elective in winter quarter of my fourth year currently titled gender studies 10 as the term was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. I started questioning my sexual orientation junior or senior year in high school. Though I have noticed the UCLA LGBT center since my freshman year of undergrad walking through Bruin Walk I hadn't been inside it until winter quarter of my fourth year of undergrad. I had been wanting to know other queer people before then, but I hadn't felt comfortable going in until then due to misperceptions of thoughts of "what goes on there?" and I may have had internalized queerphobia. After going to the center for the first time I have been there regularly ever since and I enjoy interacting with other LGBTQ+ people. I found LGBTQ+ people to be quite accepting but overtime through hearing LGBTQ+ people of color who made up a significant majority of people who hang out at the center talk about hierarchical dynamics within the LGBTQ+ community and their experiences with that, my continuing education through school and other sources of information, and my own experiences with that I have come to a much more nuanced understanding of such hierarchical dynamics. I am currently part of an LGBTQ+ water polo team based in West Hollywood

(WEHO). I first joined the team in spring of 2013 during my last year of undergrad, which I finished in summer 2013. I found out about the team when I googled “gay water polo” and found their website. I have been passionate about the team ever since and a space like that for water polo is typically not easy to come by. At one point a couple of guys from the WEHO team invited me and my sister to a gala dinner hosted by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). It remains meaningful to me how they invited us to something so significant to them when they only had two tickets to invite others along with them. It seems that the sport of water polo is particularly reflective of positionalities. As far as current records go there is no LGBTQIA+ affiliated youth (18 and under) USA water polo programs (<http://www.usawaterpolo.org/search/uswp-search.html>). Further, from my experiences and observations water polo is not a conducive sport for LGBTQIA+ people and people with disabilities outside of masters’ water polo teams, which have that affiliation. Even to this day in 2017 the special Olympics does not list water polo as one of its sports (http://www.specialolympics.org/Sections/Sports-and-Games/Sports_and_Games.aspx) and if water polo were a viable sport for people with disabilities it would be listed there.

I was diagnosed with depression my second year of undergrad. I realize the depression began and perpetuated itself due to social issues with peers at UCLA who also played water polo. Part of the myriad ways in which it got to that point was my lack of understanding of contextual factors for how to interact with my peers. For instance, I was not aware of how there was a shift in expectations from visiting friends in dorms to when they moved out of dorms to apartments. I would drop by their apartments whenever and if they were there or it seemed to me that they were still awake I would knock on their door or ring their bell. In dorms, I was free to drop by their rooms anytime as long as their lights were still on and when

their lights were on I would knock on their door and visit them which they did not seem to have an issue with when we were all living in dorms. Then when those guys moved to apartments, the expectations changed and the thought of me not being able to visit them in the same spontaneous way as often as I used to make me feel excluded. I started medication for depression in the fall quarter of my third year and experienced fatigue and weight gain as I tried to find a balance of medications and dosages that worked for me. Even doing basic things has seemed tiring for me due to my depression. I am aware at least to some extent of how issues of mental health get misrepresented including in the media and such misrepresentation breeds fear of people with mental health issues which presents them with psycho-social, institutional, and other obstacles. This in part has played out in interpersonal dispassion of such people and in particular they have been misrepresented as more prone to commit acts of violence than people who do not face mental health issues when “The vast majority of people with mental health problems are no more likely to be violent than anyone else.” (<https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/myths-facts/>). Matters of disability, mental health, and others have been pathologized in part to avoid accountability of these issues.

In general, it has felt easier for me to sustain relationships with people of all races who don’t identify as men (PARDIM) and POC of all ((non)genders)/ (genders and/or non-genders)) (POCANG) especially through all the ups and downs. At some point my fourth year of undergrad longings I had since I was a freshman undergrad at UCLA became painful yearnings. As a result of all that played out, my senior year of undergrad became my loneliest one. That senior year I got into a Christian group at UCLA since it seemed promising initially due to it being a community of many people and it seemed friendly. At that time, it had hundreds of members and it has such numbers to this day. Overtime though I felt my

relationships there becoming increasingly disappointing and eventually during winter quarter of my first year of grad school I realized it was doing me more harm than good. I decided to disassociate from the organization third or fourth week of winter quarter and while I considered myself Christian since childhood I decided not long after to be agnostic which I am to this day. I left for multiple reasons. There was this prevalent belief that one should not turn to other people for support for the sake of relying on other people but for the sake of experiencing god's presence. A heterosexist conviction among many that as guys they could not be affectionate with other guys in certain ways and/or over a certain period of time. A conviction that as people in this world we are broken and we need god and he is the only way. One time someone from the group was talking to me about sacrificial love and how I should love sacrificially. Sometimes there is a group of people that come into campus on bruin walk and preach about how we are going to hell if we don't follow Christ. I can imagine that if people of any other faith especially non-western affiliated faith came into our campus to do the exact same things that those preachers do there would have been prompt systematic response including from the police action. I have been a UCLA student for at least seven years now and I have yet to notice a non-Christian faith group outside of UCLA come into our university to perform bigotry. While this group of people preaches anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-feminist beliefs they have also made racist and other remarks as well. I have heard claims many times that Christianity is more progressive than other faiths particularly faiths that are at least mostly non-western but whether intended or not they end up perpetuating racist power fantasies including in convergence with other supremacist power fantasies. While I get very irritated with Christian hegemony at times I also acknowledge at least in part how Christianity does not always operate as privilege. For example, black churches at times have been targeted

in racially charged acts of violence and this has also occurred historically plenty of times. Mosques have also been the targets of Islamophobic violence in the U.S. and other parts of the world. If one wants any proof of Christian supremacy including in conjunction with other demographic forms of supremacy, we can take a look at the U.S. dollar. To this day figures represented in the U.S. dollar are typically white men and there is a phrase in it stating “IN GOD WE TRUST”. I am starting to think of privilege as a form of property though not necessarily physical that can be cashed in on depending on context. The term can seem vague. It has other factors such as time and place as well as others. I have felt like things elude me and that close relationships I would like to make and keep are generally less accessible to me than if I were a neurotypical gay guy. At the same time, I acknowledge that I still have ability privilege in having walking privilege. Though they do not have physical disabilities I have heard some students say that UCLA is an ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) nightmare. What they meant by that is it takes significantly more effort for people with physical disabilities and/or different sensory needs to get from one place to another depending on distance and other factors. While I struggle with mental health I recognize at least some privileges I hold to accessing mental health care. Part of it has to do with modes of communication and making sense of matters. This in part has to do with language and ways of making sense of information. For example, while I am neurodivergent I not only speak fluent English as that is my only language but I can speak and understand standard American English more generally. People of non-white racial/ethnic groups regardless of whether or not English is their first language may face more stigma and/or other barriers in addition to already facing barriers to accessing adequate mental health care due to having different modes of communication and making sense of matters. These issues in convergence with

unaccommodated neurodivergence may make it all the more difficult to access adequate mental health care. I recall being referred to an appointment at CAPS by the director of the UCLA LGBT center Friday of sixth week of my past winter quarter upon having a breakdown from hearing one of my friends died. When we got to CAPS they asked me to fill out two questionnaires in my mourning state. While I understand that this was due to my not signing in with CAPS in my entire grad school period until then despite it being a free benefit of being a UCLA student that is really unacceptable for any of our students to end up going through. While none of the questions on that questionnaire hindered me from seeing a therapist at CAPS that day I can only imagine how there were questions that could stir anxiety in ASC students. The summer of 2016 I got the opportunity to go to LEAP since I found out about it through an email from the Bruin Resource Center (BRC). The LEAP retreat, which took place from Sunday afternoon until the end of Friday took, place at UCLA and was a life-changing journey. One of the crucial epiphanies I had was how I was letting life be something that happens to me rather than pushing back against that. In other words, though not completely true, to a degree the wind of my life was blowing on me and I was passive about it rather than me being the wind of my life.

My personal journey, especially those experiences as a college student, feeds into my methods, my questions and my outcome goals of my study. I used personal interviews of ASC students at UCLA to understand themes related to questions of inclusion and quality of student experience.

Literature Review

Prevalence

On March 27, 2014, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released data on the prevalence of autism in the United States. This surveillance study identified 1 in 68 children (1 in 42 boys and 1 in 189 girls) as having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The current statistics of ASD college students are not clear, however it is estimated anywhere from 0.7 percent to 1.9 percent of the college population with an 80% incompleteness rate (VanBergeijk, Klin, & Volkmar, 2008). People with ASD represent a growing population; thus it is important to understand their needs and how to best support their academic challenges.

Intersectionality

Individuals, whether they realize it or not, process information through their own cultural lens. Different cultural backgrounds include different ethnic/racial backgrounds that are part of that lens in which cultural norms are broadly shaped by gender and can shape sexual orientation attitudes. This intersectionality of social demographic factors can shape intergroup and intragroup positionalities (Crenshaw, 1991). Whether allistic (someone who is not on the autism spectrum) or on the Autism Spectrum there is an ethnic/racial reference from which we process information from the backgrounds we originate. Depending on the environment around their ethnic/racial background that they grew up in such factor can affect attitudes of gender and sexuality. The allistic or autistic modes and cultural ones that include one's ethnic/racial modes of processing information do not operate independently of each other and continuously intersect with each other to impact university life. There are issues that

come up for students on the autism spectrum in navigating a college experience and the ways in which these issues manifest differ individually while simultaneously being shaped by the intersection of race, gender, sexual orientation, as well as other social demographics. Being on the spectrum typically entails a lack of particular inclination to neurotypical social norms which to a degree differ by one's respective backgrounds. Along with social norms, heterogeneity in navigating a college experience and/or struggling to do so is contingent upon race, gender, sexual orientation, and other demographics. Therefore, our ASC university student population encounters this personal intersectional junction which must be described.

“The concept of “intersectionality,” originally developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, refers to the need to “account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1991:283). Each category of identity must be understood as mutually constitutive as opposed to functioning independently of one another (Glenn 2004). Crenshaw’s definition of intersectionality continues to be the basis for other intersectional theories today and is the basis for the current study’s analysis (Collins 2004; Glenn 2004; Wingfield 2008).” (Copyright 2014 Rachel A. Feinstein p.56)

Kimberle Crenshaw first coined the term “Intersectionality”; Crenshaw also coined three types of intersectionality which are structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representational intersectionality. For the sake of this thesis I will be focusing mostly in structural intersectionality since my study is broadly about the experience of students on the spectrum within a university setting at UCLA that mostly deals with the structure and the varying scopes of factors specific to our university. “Structural intersectionality is the convergence of systems of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other social identities through structures (Crenshaw, 2009, Davis, 2015 p. 177-178). Privilege is granted to certain

groups whose members maintain power and dominance over others; this is implemented and maintained through structures such as policies, ideologies, and laws that play out from the societal level down to the individual level. Crenshaw (2009, p. 216) points out that "intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment" (pg. 216)" (Jones et al. 2015, p. 177-178).

According to McCall (2005) in "The Complexity of Intersectionality", there are three ways to study intersectionality, namely the anti-categorical approach, inter-categorical approach, and intra-categorical approach. The anti-categorical approach deconstructs categories into the fluid varieties within it, similar to a number line extending from zero to infinity. For example, gender is typically comprised of two categories, woman and man. However, there is also a spectrum underlying those categories. This spectrum includes, but is not limited to, identifying as a gender, not identifying with a gender, and/or having a gender identity that is outside of the gender binary and its spectrum completely. Sexual orientation for individuals with disabilities can likewise take other forms other than the accustomed binary of straight and gay/lesbian. (Allen, 2003). This may be further deconstructed into being equally attracted to people of the same, and opposite, (a/gender/sex), having a fluidity of attraction to people of all a/genders/sexes, etc. Here, a/gender to mean gender and/or lack thereof. The anti-categorical approach may also be applied to race, for which categories typically include brown, black, white, yellow, etc. in addition to other racially marked traits (e.g. skin color, eye shape, hair texture), and any combination of these. The anti-categorical approach to intersectionality is partly about the ever shifting phenomenon within categories as well as how they intersect with ever shifting phenomenon within any amount of other categories.

The Inter-Categorical approach to intersectionality analyzes each demographic category as well as the dimensions within each category. Intra-categorical complexity goes deeper into the lives of subjects at hand and works to uncover their experiences with intersections of social demographics as well as intersections of systems of inequity (see figure 1).

Among the things intersectionality will tell us is that we need to simultaneously consider the self, other, and collective preservation. Collective preservation would be the preservation of the members of the collective of a given marginalized group; which for my study will be the survival of UCLA ASC students attending our university until they complete their respective degrees. Alas we cannot eradicate any system of inequity if any other systems of inequity remain unaddressed and in this case we cannot fully address the needs of our students on the autism spectrum without addressing their needs in regards to other communities, which they are apart as well as how those needs and their needs on the spectrum are convergent. As humans in this world we are living beings whose existences are operationalized along categories of social demographics interdependently that are ongoing in shaping our lives including our mobility. Intersectionality is transcontextual meaning that its interdependent nature manifests differently with a shifting of context (Hulko, 2009).

Research Objective

The objective of this research was to study how ASCs at UCLA navigate student life and encounter difficulty doing so in conjunction with other social demographics (see Table 1), as well as the intersection of such. The goals entail addressing academic, social, intra-personal, extracurricular, and institutional aspects where students on the autism spectrum are struggling in conjunction with other marginalized identities.

ASCs are the fastest growing demographic of students with disabilities on college campuses. Enter a college campus as an ASC student can be an intimidating and, in some cases, extremely overwhelming. Part of the general consensus of current academic literature (Well et al., 2014) is that ASCs face difficulties with relationships in colleges and that these relationships are particularly likely to go awry. These relationships include interpersonal, housing inside and outside of university affiliation, extracurricular affiliations, administrative personnel, as well as professional interactions with university faculty and staff. Their difficulty with relationships is inherent in their less developed Social Cognition, which is the ability to sense social dynamics and adjust accordingly, which is amplified in the college context (Pollack, D. 2009 pg. 71). ASCs lack navigational capital (i.e., “skills of maneuvering through social institutions”, Yosso, 2005 pg. 69). For example, ASCs are more likely to be misunderstood by authority figures, increasing the risk to be cited and perhaps even dismissed from the university. Also, for reasons other than academic, this population struggles with student life. Trying to assert and encounter their own identities and how their disability and developing identities fit in the complex campus life is a major challenge. ASCs are also particularly reluctant to disclose their disability to faculty for fear of being single out (Wolf et al. 2009, p. 163), which is negatively impactful since they cannot access academic accommodations if they don’t disclose a disability, which may impact their academic outcomes.

Although UCLA has a department within campus such as CAE (Center for Accessible Education) formerly known as Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) that focuses their effort to aid these students academically, this office does not just dedicate their efforts to ASCs as their efforts focus on disabilities broadly that qualify for services. According to a learning

disabilities specialist at CAE, the number of ASCs currently registered with this office is about thirty-five. This raises a couple of important questions. First, to what extent are students on the spectrum not registering with CAE and for what reasons?

The aims of my study were to, (1) determine to how ASCs experience mutual engagement socially, in extracurricular activities, as well as in other aspects that are important to their individual development at UCLA (2) identify their respective positionalities which encompass their vectors of privilege and disadvantage as well as the intersectionalities of such that inform their social identities, and (3) to bring needed recommendations and awareness to ensure students with ASC's are able to complete their goal of attaining their UCLA degree as well as to have a positive and rewarding experience within our UCLA campus.

Methods

This study used qualitative methods and analysis (Maxwell, J.A., 2013), considering approaches to intersectionality (McCall, 2005, p.1786), to allow us to get a nuanced and textured understanding of the experiences of ASC students regarding their intersectional identities and their student life. For this thesis the intra-categorical approach to intersectionality will be my main categorical approach. I utilized personal interviews (Seidman, I. 2013) with selected ASC participants to determine their areas of needs (Cuddy, A. J. C, et. al. 2007.) and intersectional identities.

Procedures

This study ran from June 16th, 2016 through November 11th, 2016. The study was designed to have one on one interviews. I used Individual Interviews as the main qualitative research method. Research questions were formulated in a scripted protocol (See appendix 1) with the flexibility to rephrase and ask relevant follow-up questions in a conversational format. Meeting with participants consisted of going over the consent form and obtaining signed consent and demographic questionnaires. Per IRB protocol, interviews were conducted within UCLA campus and affiliated locations. During the meetings, interviews with participants were recorded. All participants were aware they were being recorded as per IRB protocol.

The format of guide/questions was designed to be informal and interactive (see Interview Protocol in Appendix). The guide questions encouraged participants by using open-ended questions (e.g., "What is it like for you to be on the autism spectrum at UCLA?") and then I paused for participants to respond. The data from the demographic questionnaire was used to generate quantitative records and all of the interviews were transcribed.

Setting and Study Participants. Study participants were recruited through flyers (placed at financial aid office, title X1, departments, LGBT center, Bruin Resource Center, graduate division, Kerkoff hall, Campbell hall, etc.), word of mouth, communicating with community stakeholders, social media, and classroom and event announcements. All participants met the requirements of being currently registered UCLA students as well as having a clinical diagnosis on the Autism Spectrum.

Participants included 5 UCLA students

The setting for the first four interviews was conducted in private rooms inside the Semel Institute, where confidentiality and privacy was stringently observed. My interview with my last participant who is a PhD graduate student was conducted in her office at Young Hall within the UCLA campus. Thus the settings for all interviews were private and trying to accommodate participants to a good comfort level to ensure no rush of anxiety would be present. All answers were completely voluntary and to my knowledge sincere in the context used. For my first two interviews two interview assistants were present. All participants were aware they were being recorded as per IRB protocol.

Coding and analysis.

In the present study, autism is considered as a single dimension, race into two dimensions, and while much more complicated in reality I am dividing sexual orientation into the two dimensions and gender into three dimensions. With race its two dimensions would be mono-racial white and people of color (POC), with gender its three dimensions would be; being woman, man, and non-binary marked, and for sexual orientation its two dimensions would be straight and non-straight. I use non-binary marked to mean participants in this study who did not mark an answer that was in the gender binary (woman, man) as well as those who

marked “gender non-binary” in the question within the demographic questionnaire that asked for their gender identity as one participant marked non-binary and another marked the answer of “other” and wrote their response as “Irrelevant” under the answer of “other”. After breaking up each category into its dimensions, the inter categorical approach breaks up each dimension of each category and then combines them with all the other dimensions of each category to form multiple groups in order to conduct an intersectional multi-group analysis of comparison of each group to each-other as well as their respective relationships to intersections of systems of inequity. Here is what that would like for my study with the dimensions of its four demographic categories of autism, race, gender, and sexual orientation according to the responses for all of my participant demographic questionnaires: monoracial white autistic non-straight women, monoracial white autistic straight women, monoracial white autistic non-straight men, monoracial white autistic straight men, monoracial white autistic non-binary marked non-straight marked people, monoracial white autistic straight non-binary marked people, non-straight autistic women of color, straight autistic women of color, non-straight autistic men of color, straight autistic men of color, non-straight non-binary marked people of color, and straight non-binary marked people of color. Notice how when I broke down each of my categories of analysis into its own respective dimensions and then combined the dimensions of all four respective categories to form them into multiple groups to conduct an intersectional multi-group analysis comparing each group to each other I ended up with twelve groups for comparison (refer to Figure 1). If I were to use class as a fifth category of analysis in this thesis with three dimensions of low SES, middle SES, and higher SES my amount of comparison groups would go from twelve to thirty-six which would be a much more sizable project for this thesis. Here is what the intra-categorical approach would like for this study: I

would begin by assuming my participants as an intersectional entity group and operate from their experiences as the focus of analysis. I would then incorporate one at a time the interdependence with the categories of race, gender, and sexual orientation in the experiences of my participants on the autism spectrum. Specific to my thesis this approach would start off with the analytical categories of autism, ethnicity/race, gender and sexual orientation but assuming them as an already intersectional whole then uncovering one by one the interdependence of these categories specific to each respective participant. For example, relative to my thesis for my first participant, I would start off with his positionally as a straight Asian American male assuming it as an intersectional whole then uncovering one by one the interdependence of the categories of analysis of autism, race, gender, and sexual orientation specific to his experiences. And this is what I would do specific to each of my other participants as well. One can say that the intra-categorical approach seeks to analyze those particularly neglected in the midst of the anti categorical and inter categorical approaches. Thus, this project emphasizes more of the intra categorical approach to intersectionality.

Results

Findings Overview

Table 1 shows demographics for the participants and Figure 1 shows the different dimensions. Although my sample pool was limited to five participants, the racial/ethnic makeup of my five participants are: one mono-racially white, (Chinese American, American Indian, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and European ancestry), who ranged in age from 21 to 26 years. Two subjects were assigned female at birth (AFAB) and three assigned males at birth (AMAB). Three out of five subjects marked identifying as straight in the “sexual orientation”

category. In the “Gender Identity” category two out of five marked “man”, two out six marked “woman”, and another marked “Gender Non-binary” (See Figure 2).

One of the most stereotyped beliefs about autistic individuals is the assumed knowledge or expertise for STEM fields in general. However, three out of five participants were Bachelor of Arts (B.A) majors with the other half in STEM. Under “The main challenge” category all participants share social issues. It’s hard to say there is a main challenge for participants since there seems to be some range. However, the majority of these participants are registered with CAE, although CAE did not factor in recruiting any of my participants. Most participants came to UCLA as transfer students from community college. And most participants lived in UCLA housing at some point in time. Therefore, the pool of participants may seem small, but it shows many commonalities as well as diversity. On the side of the personal interviews, the shortest interview rounded up to two hours and thirteen minutes and the longest was rounded up to three hours and thirty-one minutes. Two of my interviews were on the two-hour range and the other three on the three-hour range.

Themes

Overall, several themes emerged from the interviews of as ASC participants discussed their experiences as UCLA students. Although the nature and intensity of those experiences varied from person to person these students on the spectrum shared some common themes about their college experience. The common themes that emerged across the following domains: (1) Academic Challenges, (2) Social Challenges, (3) Institutional Challenge, (4) Mental Health Challenges, and (5) Intersectionality. It is important to note that these themes often interconnect and may influence one another and be the effect or cause of another. In other

words, the way these factors interact may be contextually contingent. Nonetheless, I endeavor to parse them apart in my analysis and discussion.

Academic Challenges may result due to various hidden factors for ASC students. Such hidden factors may be the evasiveness keeping us from effectively taking advantage of academic accommodations, other UCLA resources of academic assistance and struggles with appropriate academic relationships with professors. These difficulties often times manifest in a lack of optimal utilization of resources and time. For instance, knowing little to nothing about other academic supports other than CAE such as the Academic Advancement Program (AAP), the community programs office (CPO), and more pushes ASC students out of the loop of study groups in addition to other matters students in general need to address. Somehow opportunities evade us and time seems to just fly away from us. Hence, we encounter hardships in keeping up to date with opportunities to do better in classes such as getting into study groups regarding lectures and/or discussions, office hours with professors and/or TA's, review sessions, outside of class tutoring, talking to professors and/or TAs after class, talking to TAs after their discussions, and depending on the cases of respective students there are understandable fears about disclosing any of their disabilities to professors, TA's, other university faculty and/or staff members, as well as possible consequences of such. Navigating these academic challenges and lost opportunities to excel in our classes often prevent us from showing our true academic capabilities and we end up being perceived as incapable to keep up with the rigors of college or worse, that ASCs do not belong in college. One tool that would be especially helpful for first year students is to develop a free accessible app for which professors and TA's can post a map location for their classes and discussions before the beginning of each quarter. Such map should function as a google maps tailored specifically to UCLA. Currently it can be puzzling

for newcomers to even figure out the ground level depending on the respective building in question and sometimes when you enter a large building a student may not know where to go next. This app would save valuable time for us to keep up with our academic challenges.

Participant # 1 mentioned that he was perceived as not needing help academically despite his challenges on the autism spectrum by virtue of being Asian: *“Well, when you're, definitely when you're an Asian person, you're on ... They don't ... You're seen as someone who doesn't ... They don't ... You're not seen as someone who needs help, for sure. That ... [inaudible 00:30:37] ... race. Secret people are sec- ... You know, they don't see someone who needs help in the institution.”* The model minority myth and his academic challenges on the autism spectrum converged to exacerbate his academic challenges. This is partly due to his embarrassment of being vulnerable about struggling academically as an Asian and he talks about it in our interview. It's taken him seven years to complete his undergrad studies at UCLA. He mentions how on top of being in a vulnerable academic status that threatens his ability to stay at UCLA, he was being confronted about it by an authority figure and such situations are especially uncomfortable for him being Asian. By talking about his experiences with the model minority stereotype he is shedding light about the convergent academic struggles that can come with being Asian on the autism spectrum while simultaneously shedding light on the broader context facing Asians with that stereotype.

His experiences on the spectrum with the model minority stereotype reminds me how when I think of shame I think about internalized policing of norms and part of that internalized policing of norms is not just failing to adhere to its standards of achievement but self consciousness is being vulnerable about it. Such subconsciousness can be hindering especially if you need help. Shame seems significant from a sociological standpoint and is specifically

significant for any populations marked by the model minority stereotype including Asians and Asians Americans. Further, since the model minority myth is a historical creation of white supremacy it functions to benefit white people as the dominant group by rating “minority report cards” as targets of white generated racism. (Chou, 2015 p. 20).

P5:

“And there's, if we can design computer programs that do things like take your blood pressure and, you know, translate it into a phone and then keep it in the phone, well, we can probably set up a portal where OSD students can submit their homework at a later date honestly and not be able to see the answers. You know what I mean? Like it, there, they could do something like that, but they don't...” and “... we don't go through those steps because it's difficult.” and “So like there's a lot of barriers that way, where I see in North Campus, at least in my opinion ...” and “Or, ih, um, there needs to be other wi-, routes to like getting help when you have a person with a disability and dependents. So yeah, that does need to be like, addressed, but it's, it's, you can only do so much. It's like, eventually running to OSD and then asking for more help, and then running back and then doing this and that and it actually takes a lot of time.”

P3:

“Like, something I've just learned this quarter because I'm usually really scared to ask questions. You know, part of it is just again, I don't want to seem disabled, so I avoid asking questions. If I'm not sure about something, I'll usually go home and Google it or try to figure it out on my own even if it takes me hours and hours, but here, but here, I've, especially, like, some of the TAs from my classes, they've taught me that it's just better and no one cares in this kind of place if you, if you just be stupid.”

At some point weeks after our interview when talking to each other he mentioned getting a poor grade on one of his midterms and another time he mentioned struggling in school generally though now he is doing better in classes the last time we talked weeks ago. However, registering with CAE and getting their accommodations would have made it less of a hardship from the start.

Social Challenges that typically come with being on the autism spectrum do not mean one can never develop adequate social skills. However, such skills are not something that come naturally to us. As a matter of clinical diagnosis, lack of social skills is an Autistic trait marker; thus we have to work really hard at developing it over time and it typically comes with difficulty detecting social cues and adapting accordingly. In other words, being on the spectrum comes with a lack of skills in picking up subtle social signs allistic people give off much of which comprises of body language and knowing how to adapt to what these social signs are calling for. A significant amount of communication happens through body language and its meanings for which we do not naturally pick up. It is assumed among allistics that others would know what they are communicating through these subtle cues so when these ingrained and typically unspoken social rules are broken social dynamics are likely to go awry. In fact, two main criteria listed for determining whether someone is on the Autism spectrum are restrictive and repetitive behavior and impairment in communication. One strategy for Autistic individuals to overcome these shortcomings may be taking social skills courses.

A course that I had the opportunity to take that opened up my eyes about social issues is The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®) originally developed at UCLA SEMEL Institute. Had I gone through this program starting from the spring quarter of my freshman year, it would have saved me a lot of grief from my second year

of undergrad up until today and would have prevented me from developing my depression in the first place.

This speaks to how white manhood sets dominant norms for how to be a man and how as an Asian man on the autism spectrum he felt inadequate for “not being manly enough” due to not performing the standard based on those norms because of his difficulty navigating white male neurotypical norms. Being on the spectrum can come with difficulties even navigating norms within one’s own background so it may be significantly harder to navigate norms outside of such background. It may be especially hard for autistic people of color to navigate dominant norms in addition to other norms since they were not raised in white contexts like white people on the spectrum and NT white people. To a degree people of different backgrounds live with different norms so who is to determine that everyone must adhere to one group’s standard in order to attain success socially, academically, politically, materially, and/or otherwise? Having said that, I am now convinced research on university students on the spectrum is a particularly good route to go in terms of getting at norms and how they are played out interpersonally, institutionally, ideologically, internally, and intersectionally in which the other “I’s” can be analyzed in conjunction with the intersectionality of issues of social demographics (i.e., race, class, a/gender, faith and/or lack thereof, dis/ability, sexual orientation, geography, age, etc.). In regards to P1 it is practical to consider how the MMM plays out interpersonally, institutionally, ideologically, internally, and intersectionally for ASC students. P1’s struggles in conjunction with the intersectionality of social demographics using the intersection of autism and race as an anchor point from which other intersections should be considered. Regarding universities, it is also important to acknowledge how to a degree different institutions of higher education set different norms specific to their own respective

institutions and how that may have varying consequences for intergroup and intragroup relations. Keeping the “I’s” I mentioned in mind students facing the intersectional issues of P1 along autism and race in the MMM including its intersections with other social demographics need future consideration after the submission of my thesis as well as how that may have consequences in how they experience intergroup and intragroup relations. While it is challenging enough for a person on the spectrum of any race to navigate societal norms, whites on the spectrum may have it significantly easier since they were still raised in the context of whiteness and compared to POC on the spectrum they may also have it much easier also by virtue of having white families as well as other white associates. Autistic whites may also have it much easier by virtue of not generally being made obligated to maintain two sets of norms, both individual backgrounds and neurotypical white norms. In the first paragraph P1 mentions Asians as his main source of peers and it may not be farfetched to say they are his home when it comes to peers. It seems that he gravitates towards other Asians and needs to be in a social context with at least one Asian for him to not feel out of place. This last paragraph is an example of a situation where the intersection all of the demographic categories of autism, race, gender, and sexual orientation in my thesis play out. It seems autism set the stage for such intersection to play out when P1 reported that he accidentally walked into the wrong apartment and he felt condescended by white women who he thought were attractive, which speaks to the indirect intersection of white neurotypical womanhood and on my participants’ side the direct intersection of being a straight Asian male on the spectrum. In this occurrence he also mentions a part of his discomfort being that he felt out of place since there were no other Asians present and the fact that he says he felt something about race and autism at that moment suggests the intersection of racism and ableism was at play whether consciously and/or subconsciously. It

seems that the “socially awkward Asian stereotype” and ableism converged to shape that experience in which there may be something specifically about such occurrence in the context of white womanhood that is relevant. This may also be an example of how whether consciously and/or subconsciously having white women be the default model of femininity can be directly and/or indirectly detrimental to people of color of all a/genders especially for those who may be made more vulnerable by being on the autism spectrum and/or having any other neurodivergence.

P3: when I asked him *“To what extent do you feel comfortable being recognized as someone on the autism spectrum at UCLA?”* he replied,

“Not comfortable at all.” and “I tell almost nobody. I told you because this is part of the study and I haven’t told anybody I’ve met here.” “I don’t register on, um ... I didn’t on my applications, I don’t mention myself as disabled or handicapped, and that applies to school and everyone else. I do not like ... I, I honestly don’t like, uh, uh, being even part of the equation. I didn’t want people considering that when I got accepted, I don’t want people considering that when I do job interviews or anything. And most of my friends, not that I have met and here yet, but I just got here, but I ... My friends from CC and everywhere, I very rarely tell them. It’s usually a few years before I’m willing to mention it to someone, and by that time they’ve usually figured it out, but it’s still nice to be able to say it and be honest that way.”

When I asked P1 *“When are your aspirations as a UCLA student?”* he stated *“Asp ... Do ex ... Join extracurricular activities and be ... hmm ... be com - be comfortable at texting friends and not being afraid to call people, call people and friends. That’s what I ... That’s what on my mind is at UCLA. Yeah. Um ... and ... and when it comes to ... and pass classes. Yeah. My ... my money’s on that social ... on social life.”*

When I asked P4 *“How many friends do you have on campus, it doesn't have to be exactly just...”* she replied *“Oh my fucking god, um ... I'd say probably about upwards to about maybe 10 or 20.”*, *“Like, I mean low bar for friendship, you just have to be glad to see me, when I, when I come in somewhere, someone has to be happy, if someone is happy to see me they're my friend now.”*

When I asked the same question as above to other participants P1 replied *“Hmm ... um ... friends ... hmm, maybe 5.”*, *“Hard ... Hard to tell. Yeah. But most... I've made ... I've ... don't know ... I have no friends outside of the student activity center.”*, P2 replied *“On campus? Probably zero.”*, P3 replied *“Ironically, today, I went from one friend to zero on campus.”*, P5 replied *“I have like, maybe five, or 10.”*, *“Like, like that's, but those are, I, I, you can call them acquaintances. I'm polite, so I meet a lot off-, and, and, and in Science, I meet a lot of people, but, I really just have my fiancé. That's it.”*

When I asked participants how often they feel socially accepted P2 replied *“At UCLA, not very, at all.”*, P3 replied *“Hmm ... Lately, I would say that hasn't happened much at all. I've been, but that, that's kind of normal. I just moved to Los Angeles in July, and I'm at a new school, so that happens. Even if you're a neurotypical person, it takes time to get ace- to get acclimated.”*, P4 replied *“I want to say barely. Um, just on the basis that of course I have depression so. Um, like, but I always kind of left out regardless. Like people will talk to me and they'll be like 'Oh my god, Marissa's here' but not like in a way that I think I want to be accepted. Like I wanna be like the center of the room sometimes. Um, but you know I think I am like some what accepted.”*, P5 replied *“Uh ... About like, 35% of the time.”*

Institutional Challenges. Though I am not saying this is true on all counts it seems there is institutional complicity in our university and participants in this research seem to get

different views and aspects of it. To no fault of our school original design as an institution, it is being made inconducive for ASC students to navigate our university and to an extent the UCLA experience broadly has been like a dynamic maze for us to navigate. The fact of the actual topography of UCLA is just one aspect out of an ocean of issues. Having said that, the topography is not problematic but not adequately accommodating for it is. Being on the autism spectrum already comes with what I will call navigational jeopardy and that is not just in the social sense as I have previously discussed in the “Social Challenges” section but in the social world in general. In the case of this project the emphasis is on the path to achievement in the higher education setting of UCLA and how ASC students experience navigational jeopardy in the social world of this setting. In the case of this section we are focusing on the institutional aspect of such social world though in reality all aspects are intersectional with each other. At least one aspect of institutional complicity P2 emphasizes is how UCLA is optimizing for its own image much more than adequately addressing student needs and where a problem is addressed our school puts a patch on it rather than working to eradicate the source of such problem. While these patches are also important, if we stop at putting a patch on a problem and not work to eradicate such problem at its source, then we will never truly solve the problem in question thus never achieving fully meaningful change. While I do not quote P1 here, one important factor to note from him is how biases including implicit biases function to perpetuate systems of power, privilege, and oppression (what I call systems of Inequity in short) including but not limited to doing so at an institutional level. We need to effectively address these biases, otherwise they will consciously and/or unconsciously continue to effect how our university shapes our ASC students lives. One factor to note from my interview with P3 is the perceived and/or actual stigma associated with disclosing a disability including being on the autism

spectrum and one matter that is apparent to me particularly from this interview is how it is not only practical to push visibility of disability including autism but to simultaneously push for acceptance as well as to push back against internalized ableism. This is also reflected of how if one wants to get disability accommodations they need to disclose their disability in which such disclosure entails providing documentation as well as how actual and/or perceived stigma can hinder someone from seeking such accommodations for which depending on respective students internalized ableism can also play a role in hindering them from reaching out for this help. P4 emphasizes our campus being difficult to navigate. An implication for accommodating to student needs P5 emphasizes is enabling students to obtain accommodations without the risk of putting their academic progress in jeopardy from vulnerability to wasting precious time they can use to progress in their classes and live their lives. It is important to keep in mind how it is not just accommodations taking up time but also other institutional processes that students almost inevitably confront (i.e. financial aid, student accounting, departmental matters, ASHE center for medical needs, housing, making appointments depending on respective needs and/or wants, etc.) in an environment that is time consuming. Another important factor to note from P5 is to advocate for more departmental acceptance of student needs particularly when it comes to students with disabilities including ASCs and to give them more than four years to complete their degrees without financial strings attached.

When I asked P2 *“What obstacles do you experience being on the autism spectrum at UCLA?”* they replied *“I don't know. I don't think anyone's punched me in the face for being Autistic.”* and *“Oh Yeah. That was funny.”*, *“So as I was told me to go to that for a month til' you go to therapy for these things for a month before I was allowed in the gender group, but I didn't do*

that and I'm still not in a gender group. That was an obstacle. So I've been physically barred from insti- from, uh, institutional help with trans people-"

"which is bad anyway but whatever they offer, the things that they offer I am barred from because I am autistic. That is one obstacle, let me think of other ones. I mean, some people make fun of me for having autistic traits. I guess that's an obstacle. And I guess autistic traits aren't often seen as feminine so I guess that's an obstacle."

P4:

"Well, I do think UCLA is a ADA worst nightmare scenario. I'm expecting somebody to sue our school for breaches. If not for anything else, then for those freaking hills everyone has to climb. Up and down. Like, seriously, guys? Also, why is the, why is this the center for students with disabilities, why is the office for students with disabilities all the way in Murphy when they could be in the student activity center with the LBGT center? But oh, no, I get it. We have to all hide, right? Just put us all the way to the furthest part of the school. Am I right?"

Um, but, I do think UCLA is pretty, um, okay. I mean, at least for me, as someone who isn't as autistic. Well, you know. Basically I pass way more. So, I do think that it's okay on that round.

Um, but I do think that there's, you know, we have to work on the whole attendance thing and the note taking system should probably be by somebody with, like ... If they can take really good notes, as opposed to just, like, "Hey, who wants this job?" And they're like, "I'll do it, for money." Because I had to look through some of my notes that were written by somebody else for my Israel Palestine class, and part of them, I don't think got all the way written down.

Because I couldn't find, like, certain words. Like, like, I knew what they were referring to, but it wasn't the words."

“But no. I mean, they definitely need more signs because all the buildings look the god damned same. First year, I was lost for, like, the majority of first quarter. It was madness.”

P2:

“And for example ... And another thing with the OSD stuff, yeah, it's really amusing because they'll stare at... Like if you try to do anything reasonable that they've never heard before, that's completely normal in other places, they'll stare at you like, uh, you're some kind of alien or something. Like for example, uh, they said, oh well we have note takers, right? And then, um, I said yes, well I would prefer to have ... 'Cause I have social anxiety and always like to have trouble going into class sometimes ... Like well I would rather have these people be enabled to take videos of this thing and like would you be able to get permissions for that and they were like oh, I don't know, that's not a thing we do. That is breaking the pattern, oh no, we cannot do anything about this. And then said, you will have to ask yourself, I guess. Our department is not dealt- no one had asked this and no one has gotten this approved ever before in the history of UCLA.

I was like, okay, that is majorly incompetent, most univ- a lot of Universities record their things and distribute them for free on, like, as a norm, it's not going to break the system, and I just... Pretty sure u could have sent an email asking the professor for permission to do this, but now, instead, I have to do this myself and write an email, without your institutional backing.” and “So like, they'll allow you to do whatever rigid system they have set up, but they will not adapt for you, they'll expect you to adapt to the system. The system will not adapt to you. (heavy sigh) Which makes them incompetent because they only adapt the system once a year, or whatever, once every 10 years when something really major comes up. Oh yeah, when I tr- When I campaigned to get the bathroom signs, uh, that took about 8 months ... Six of those months

were delayed because they said that, oh no, the bathroom signs have to be accessible to people who are blind and we have to make sure there's braille on them. They didn't really care about that, they just wanted to delay things. And the, uh, at the end of the 6 months of deliberation of making this available to students with disabilities, we can't do this unless we make it available to [inaudible 00:20:01] with disabilities, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh- Can't do this unless we get available assistance with disabilities ,dahdahdahdahdah, after six months of that they gave, they printed out something on a piece of computer paper, slipped it inside of like a plastic sheet and taped it to the wall. There wasn't any braille at all. They didn't actually care about the braille. They only cared about how can we delay this and not modify whatever we're doing cause we really hate to change anything at all. And it's so owneris that we're forced to adapt to students preferences. What a terrible burden that is. It's entire attitude that pervades this institution and doesn't pervade other institutions. It's not human nature. It's something to do with how this place is set up.”

P4:

“Well, you know how, after, okay. So you know how when you're walking, like, along the, um, fucking Bruin Walk, whatever it's called.”, “Bruin Road, whatever.”, “Anyway. Um, they ... When you get up to a certain point, you don't know where anything is. Like, how I had trouble finding wherever the hell Semel is. Um, also I had a lot of trouble, for a long time, I had a lot of trouble figuring out, "Okay, is that one Humanities or is that one Humanities?" Because the Humanities building and the other one look the, and, "Oh, Humanities and Haines look the same." Um, so I can, so I still have some trouble, like, remembering where am I.”, “Um, I also think that a big issue is just, like, all the walking, because you can't really judge how far away your class is. So I had classes in Melnitz, and I'm ... So I usually leave my room an hour before

my class. So I don't get lost or too tired. Because if I'm tired, I'm just like, "I'm going to go home. Screw this. School is garbage. I will be a hobo." You know."

P3:

"Sometimes, like, at the career center at UCLA, it was a little more specific. She was able to show me some, like, some books, and more specific things, but a lot of the time, especially at CC, I would get shown resources that I probably could have found myself. I just thought that a, I would just think that a professional would have a better idea, so I ask them first.", "Well, I mean, I'm going to school full time, and I'm working 35 hours a week.", "That's, I mean, that's, that's really all there is to it. Um, there's not really anything else that takes my time luckily. That's why I haven't really bothered to pursue clubs or whatever because I know I've, I've got a full schedule already.", "And since most kind of, most, like, theater things happen during the weekend, that means I have to, which is usually when I work, that means I have to try to make my work schedule fit around that.", "And that's tough 'cause my work does, I-, I have the easiest time finding work on weekends.", "It's something I want to do, but it's like, man, I have to make money.", "And I have to, yeah, and I got to make the trip over here. Unless I want to pay 12 bucks to park here, I have to take a, I have to, like, take an hour out of my day just to get here first, another hour getting back."

Mental Health Challenges. Often times Autism comes with vulnerabilities to develop other neurodivergent conditions. While I do not fully agree with this term since it necessarily implies a deficit connotation to Autism and other neurodivergences to a degree I am including it here since it is commonly being used in clinical literature of the subject. The term “Co-Morbid” is used to mean a disorder that comes with vulnerabilities to develop other disorders. During my interview I was trying to gauge at responses of extracurricular activities but instead the theme that came up was about issues of mental health.

P1:

“I never feel the feeling of joy yeah”

P2:

“Um getting into UCLA, um. Well. Let's see in high school I got into Berkeley and then I accepted my application to Berkeley. But the last quarter of my high school career I got very depressed about my gender identity and being trans or what not. So then I didn't do anything that last quarter, and then Berkeley refused my admittance, so I went to community college. And then I completed core course work there and sent my application and UCLA was ah, one of the few places that accepted it. So then I went to UCLA, “I really don't like it here.”, “It's terrible socialistic, fascistic. They fine you \$250 for jay walking. And, reminds me of 1984, and they seem to optimize for having a good image other than actually caring what the students want.”

P2:

“And they require you to have a meal plan your first uh, year, and the meal plan is terr- and the, whatever. It's like \$10 per meal or whatever and that's mandatory, so it's like they're maximizing for, oh yeah, we know what's best for you and we're not going to give you the

option to express what you think is best for you.”, “And they require you to have a meal plan your first uh, year, and the meal plan is terr- and the, whatever. It's like \$10 per meal or whatever and that's mandatory, so it's like they're maximizing for, oh yeah, we know what's best for you and we're not going to give you the option to express what you think is best for you.”

P3:

“I, I did have one person, that was, that we, like I said, we talked to, we talked a lot. But, the fact is we both just got too busy. We kind of just kinda lost... Well, no, this is an interview, there's no point, I'll just be honest. I, I was lonely, so I acted kind of clingy. I wanted this person to spend time with me a lot, and it annoyed them.” At some point weeks after the interview P3 reached out to me saying he wants to make an appointment at CAPS but does not know what to say at the front desk so he asked me for advice on it to which I respected and fortunately that went well for him.

When I asked P4 *“What are your aspirations as a UCLA student?”* she replied *“Not die, that's really it. Like that's kind of one of my biggest issues I want, I don't want to, I would like to live, that's it. I don't care I just I don't want death, I like living.”*, *“I don't wanna starve I just want to work and be fine.”*, *“I don't have a lot of aspirations that's just kind of how I work I guess.”*

P4:

“We do have a homeless population at our school. And, you know, how did they get without a home? Um. They're not, like, on the streets because they want to be and because there's enough hous- There's not enough houses. There's enough houses. It's just, um, they can't... They don't have the money for it. And so it really hurts our students because while they're focusing on surviving, you know, they're not studying. While they're focusing on surviving, they're not

thinking about their future. Like, I'm focused on not dying. And, like, I know that that's not helping me make decisions. I know it's just making it worse. But the thing is is that what can I do?", "'Cause that's the worry. 'Cause that's the worry that a lot of our generation has. That we're going (sniffs) ... That we're just... That if we're not careful, we're all just going to die."

P5:

"And it's really hard to balance, it was really hard to balance like getting medications and, and, um, um, the diagnoses during that time. And so I actually wasn't diagnosed with oon, with autism spectrum until, like, about a year ago, um, I mean or two years ago."

"There was another situation where it's like, someone said, you know, as a joke, 'I didn't take my medicine today, so I, um, I'm going to act crazy.' And she said it after I explained to the group that I did not have medication and therefore I could not do the presentation at the time, if I could just have a minute. Um, and ...", "And it was due to the fact that the group meeting was long, I didn't know that we would be there that long.", "So, these type of situations where you have, you know, medication, where you have routines, where you have things that like you do and they might be different than other people, they, they don't really fully accept it, but, ah, that, ah, over the year they have become more accepting."

"... and, this is not just on the autism spectrum, this is like, you know, it, maybe I need to sleep at some time every night, I need a routine, and so I can't, I can't function if I don't have my routine. And, if I have to stay up all night and do homework, it doesn't work for me. l-i-ih, I break down eventually, you know, I mean, and, and, it's hard enough for me to like function with this many people around, you know, and so when I ask for accommodations, it's, it's really hard to get them, meaning like an extra day on homework, you know, a, you know. Um, ih, when we're having a test, it's always approved, but sometimes you need weird accommodations

and they're not. And that's okay, but it's, it's definitely a systematic, you know, not understanding why someone would need that.”

“But, that's what I've heard. It's like, that's the mentality. And so when you have that mentality, it's really actually destructive for people who need to take more than four years.”, “'Cause I took six. (Laughs) It's like, I, I just did.” “And I think if we can get rid of that mentality, especially for OSD students and for students who need a little more time maybe to process things...”

Intersectionality factors such as Ethnicity/Race, Gender and Sexual orientation deepens with the shifting of relevance depending of how much any aspect influences and interacts with one another. Each ASC individual carries their own set of circumstances that pushes the balance of their student life toward one or more parts of such aspects. For each ASC student the elements of intersectionality regarding Race/Ethnicity, Gender and Sexual Orientation may play a defining intersectional junction. Thus the degree and elements that intersect with one another and their relevance may influence one's success and must be assessed at an individual yet broader level. In the case of my participants I will try to show these intersections as broadly as possible, but attempting to keep objectivity for each of their own influential factors in play.

The participants P1 and P5 show commonalities in the intersection of Race/Ethnicity and Gender. P2 shows intersection with Gender and Sexual Orientation. P3 does not show any particular salient intersectionality. P4 shows intersection with Race/Ethnicity, Gender and Sexual Orientation (refer to Figure 3).

P1 and P5 on the intersection of Race/Ethnicity and Gender.

P1 on Race/Ethnicity:

“... If I travel somewhere else and it's ... and it's ... if it's mostly white people and there's no Asians, I feel awkward, and ... and that combines with the autism, makes it uncomfortable...”

P1 on Gender:

“...Well, with autism, I don't have interpersonal skills, social skills, and that makes me feel un-man - un-masc ...feel like I'm a fe- un-masculine, if I'm surrounded by males who are like, white males, who are sociable. Yeah ... Out of it... Asian ... I'm like ... Yeah, males ... it does”

P5 on Race/Ethnicity

When I asked P5 *“Do you feel compelled to identify yourself as a member of a particular race?”*

“I don't really identify with one, mainly because my mom is white ...”, “... and my dad who identifies like closer to black ...”, “... or brown ...”, “... and so I kind of don't identify as anything, and I kind of [inaudible 00:55:04] because it's like I don't really feel like I fit in much place, many places ...”, “... but, you know, some people think I'm white and some people think I'm Mexican and some people think I'm Cuban, if they know what Cuban is.”, “And then, uh, you know, it's, it's just, ah, ih, identifying with a race is even harder because like, then you're, uh, I, then you stand behind something and a name like, it's, it does kind of put you like in a, not a box but it, it, it compels you to be behind that certain race.”

P5 on Gender

On this quote the problem revealed is gendered since she was explaining how being a woman in the chemistry graduate department that is still significantly dominated by men, she was found to be easy to target.

“... a student was telling me that I was not working well enough in the Chemistry Department and I was, um, getting threatened to be taken off the paper, um, and even though I'd done the work.” ... , “I think, and I don't, you know, go out with these guys and like I didn't like, I don't know, I'm not one of the guys. I wasn't like, you know, a, uh, I wasn't like in their...” , “... group, and so, I, I, or clique ...” , “... and therefore I kind of was easy to just manipulate and, you know, um, take anger out on, and this graduate student was like that.”

P2 intersection of Gender and Sexual Orientation.

P2 on Gender:

“Mum, the person who does the gender group, ah, told me to go to, ah, therapy sessions before I was allowed in the Gender Affirming group, because I seemed Autistic. So I was not aloud in to the therapy group for...” , and “To the therapy group for transgender people. Because I didn't look her in the eye or ... I- and I didn't announce my presence when I was in the room.”

P2 on Sexual Orientation:

*"I cannot believe you're doing this! I don't care about your, whatever, sexuality, but, uh, I do not agree with your politics." And then like, "Oh yes the restrooms are fine, but not the locker rooms." And then she said UCLA was over and that I brainwashed everyone inside the locker room, which is delightful. I mean it was terrible that she called the police, or whatever, but... Yeah. ... *sigh* ...”*

P4 the intersection of Race/Ethnicity, Gender and Sexual Orientation.

P4 on Race/Ethnicity:

“Because I'm extremely radical. I've had somebody who tried to explain to me about how Iranian inter dynamics work and the diaspora. And I looked at her and I'm like, "You're

not even Iranian." "But, um, but my friend was saying like, "Oh well, they're of a religious minority and you're from a religious majority in Iran. So isn't it kind of, like, wrong?" And I looked at her, and I just was like, "It's a very different thing out here. Because out here, um, Iranians can, won't be Muslim publicly."

P4 on Gender:

"With Autistic girls, we get left out as it is. There's so ... You know, we're under diagnosed, we're, um ... I mean, obviously I'll protect autistic children regardless. Like, because there's so much abuse that goes on against us. And I don't want that for them. Um, so I'm very protective of girls on that basis because it's like you're going to be getting it two different ways, three ways if you're black or brown. Five, depending on whatever the- else is going on with you. Um, like, I'm not going to let this continue happening. Um, I used to work ... I was a nanny before I started UCLA, and one of my kid- and my kid was ... That I was watching was Autistic, and I hated feeling helpless with her because, um ... And it wasn't because of anything she did."

P4 on Sexual Orientation:

"...because what they say about asexual people, they say about bisexual people. They say it about trans people. Um, you know, I'm not a pur- I'm not a purist. Like, I believe in left-wing ideologies, but I'm not like a freaking crazy purist where it's like, "Oh, we must have a vanguard" and all this other stuff or "we must have our own spaces and circle the wagons!" ...

"Because like, what is autistic lesbian going to say like, when she's I- when she's been like, "Oh, well you shouldn't throw anybody out." And then it's like, this bullshit happens, you know?", "Because she used to- then she's just going to like, leave because you're an asshole."

Study Limitations, Implications and Future Directions

As with all studies, this study has several limitations. The first is that it is a small sample of participants. At this, UCLA had no statistical accountability in terms of number of students in the spectrum. CAE's verbal assessment of thirty-five autistic students is not supported by any demographics or statistical evidence. Thus, an important recommendation is continuing accountability of students in the spectrum moving forward.

Another study limitation is the definition of the intersectional categories with respect of dimensions. Specifically, for this study I chose to break down racial identity into two main categories. Either Monoracial White or People of Color (POC). I use Monoracial white to mean someone that is white who does not have any non-white heritage, does not experience non-whiteness materially, and/or does not experience non-white racialization. The interest in participating in this research has continued; as of this 2017 winter quarter three more UCLA ASC students have contacted me expressing interest in my research and to participate in the interview process. Unfortunately, those new potential participants will not be able to be part of this thesis research. Since data sample is one of the issues, I intend to continue conducting more interviews and recruiting. For future directions of this research I plan to incorporate socioeconomic status SES (Socio-Economic Status) since this issue has important implications for one's ability to thrive.

Further, while ASC students may experience ableism to any degree their lives are not shaped by it in the same way. In fact, no populations within any demographic are shaped in the same way by systems of inequity in their overall lives and analyses which treat issues of categories of social demographics separately are very limiting.

Lastly, in hopes of getting more participants when I advertise my flyer I am not going to just say I am conducting focus groups but individual interviews or focus groups and though I am not certain this is a factor I suspect that more people on the spectrum would have felt more comfortable participating in my study if my flyer advertised having the option of an individual interview.

Conclusion and recommendations

Challenges for students on the autism spectrum are daunting and deep. The constant hassle of balancing the academic rigors with navigating campus as an individual on the spectrum seems to take a toll on this population. To obtain their degrees at UCLA, takes enormous amount of effort and longer time than just the regular four years expected for undergrad. One evident conclusion is that this group requires extended time to complete tasks. Therefore, all of my participants will need longer than the usual four years to complete their graduation requirements.

Another institutional aspect is to work closer with CAE, first, to have better accountability of this population, and secondly is to improve on their services. It is important to better monitor the timing and quality of services, such as note taking and communicating with professors for proctoring. Lastly it would be useful if CAE could have an incoming and current student orientation session on self-advocacy and expectations. Currently CAE automatically operates as if all their student population fully understands how their respective academic departments are run and how to access all the services, which is detrimental to some of their registered students. One specific issue seems to be the task of coordinating with professors for certain accommodations and leaving the student to deal directly with the instructors on their own. Instructors can include professors and TA's.

Further, it is important as an institution to recognize that more awareness and training for professors to help meet the needs of ASC students is required. A void that seems to exist is how to assist individuals on the spectrum to better socialize on campus. All of my participants show needs in this area. It would be important to provide supports to extend ASC students peer social supports so that they might better find friends in which they can be themselves. Working to be educated against stereotypes could be an improvement in their quality of lives. While it is likely that all of the participants will eventually be able to complete their graduation requirements, their quality of life seems to be suffering. This aspect can be improved if each participant could find friends and support in safe spaces within campus. In order to see if an improvement on this area could be achieved, a neurodiversity club was initiated by me and other students this 2016 fall quarter. Hopefully this will help develop a safe space and to help individuals find quality friendships.

As with every population, students on the spectrum including those marginalized along intersectionalities of race and/or other social demographics need to be much more enabled to do more than just survive and get by. My hope is that this research could be the beginning of recognizing this population as a growing demographic within UCLA and to accept them and better meet their needs in order to have a full enjoyable experience. One helpful tool would be to streamline services electronically as to avoid wasting time in unnecessary trips back and forth to CAE. Three out of five of my participants felt stressed by difficulty utilizing their time to accomplish their work as students and instead they were investing valuable time arranging to get their accommodations straight with CAE. We ASC students can be left out of the loop of what's going on at our school at a given moment.

Since we do not navigate the social world in higher education in the same way as NT's, which in itself is not an issue, but when differences in navigating the social world in universities are not accommodated then it can lead to being left out of loop of "what" is available at our university. Especially in time contingent availabilities and knowing fewer students than non-ASC students may make finding out about these matters more inaccessible. Therefore, a source for informational accessibility is needed which need not be restricted to ASC students but would also serve well for students in general.

The "what" can include but is not limited to resources, opportunities, events, gatherings, and more. This office in particular can be of better assistance to ASC students since we have a difficult time navigating what is available at UCLA. The source of information I am suggesting is to open a central source of information office accessible to all UCLA students where they can inform what is available at our university. This source can be the office located at the front desk on the A level of Ackerman Union which is next to the post office. To assist ASC's after graduation it would be paramount to make the career center available for free to students on the autism spectrum and other disabilities. While mostly from allistic people I remember hearing comments from students that they would like to use the career center but hardly have any time to utilize it. There is an extent to which anxieties about the future do affect college students' experiences and it makes sense especially given the hyper-capitalist society that we live in. These issues are very real considering how even those who hold a bachelor's degree or higher degree are struggling to secure a job let alone a career.

While keeping this in mind it is notable that compared to allistics including those with or without disabilities the disparities in securing a job let alone a career among those on

the autism spectrum is especially disturbing. I can personally attest that a former graduate colleague of mine on the autism spectrum who now finished his PHD was worried about whether or not he was going to be able to secure an occupation to support himself and let us not forget that he is a white cisgender male so this is not even yet getting at vulnerability of job insecurity among people on the autism spectrum who are in communities of color as well as how that occurs intersectionally with other social demographics. Fortunately, he ended up securing a position as a postdoctoral student but that is a sufferable process to go through and it can be prevented. Its troubling to have to worry about how one is going to secure an occupation to literally keep themselves alive after college particularly for ASC students compared to their neurotypical counterparts especially for those who are people/person(s) in communities of color (PICOC) including how that occurs intersectionally with other demographics given the gendered racialization of the labor market both in wage gaps and vulnerabilities to job insecurity in regards to their respective positionalities (Browne & Misra, 2003).

ASC students need transitional supports entering and leaving the university. Current ASC students need transitional supports for adapting to our university and supports for transitioning from university to employment. ASC alumni could also use supports of the latter. It is counterintuitive to serve a population only for them to be left to their consequences after they pass a certain stage of their life. We should not cease to matter to our university even when we are no longer students.

APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

Challenges and Opportunities Facing Students on the Autism Spectrum at UCLA

DISCUSSION GUIDE

[DATE: May #, 2016]

SECTION	CONTEXT, QUESTIONS & SPECIFIC PROBES	SPECIFICATIONS
OPENING REMARKS & PROCEDURE (5-10 minutes)	Welcome. My name is _____ and I am a _____ with [UCLA]. I will be moderating the discussion this morning/evening. I really appreciate your taking the time to share your views and experiences with me. The purpose of this focus group is to understand the Challenges and Opportunities Facing Students on the Autism spectrum at UCLA in conjunction with The Intersection of Autism, Ethnicity/Race, Gender, Sexual Orientation, as well as what obstacles you overcame to get here as a UCLA student and how you beat those obstacles. We will use the information that you share with us today to have a better understanding of the demographics of our population of students on the spectrum at UCLA. Having said that, the results of this research may contribute to society by increasing our consciousness and understanding of the struggles students on the autism spectrum face in a university setting. This study is being conducted here at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). It is funded by the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies (GSE&IS). If you have any questions I would be happy to answer them before we start. Our discussion will last approximately 1.5 to 2 hours.	Brief introduction, purpose of focus groups, funding agency and how information will be used. NOTE: • Locations of snacks/beverages • Restrooms should be used prior to or after session.

SECTION	QUESTION & SPECIFIC PROBES	SPECIFICATIONS
CONSENT AND RULES (5-10 minutes)	Your participation is completely voluntary and you are under no obligation to discuss anything that you do not feel comfortable discussing with me and the rest of the group. You can leave at any time. All information you provide during this session will be kept confidential by the research team. All participants will be asked to keep what is said during the focus group between participants only. However, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. To protect your confidentiality, your comments will not be linked with identifying personal information and will be used only to help guide our team in developing programs to help students with autism spectrum disorders positively enhance their experiences in a university setting. I will be audio taping our discussion so that those of us who are working on this project can listen to your comments later and make sure that they are accurately represented. Only members of the research team will listen to the tapes, and we will destroy them at the end of the study. To protect your confidentiality, please use your FIRST names only. As we talk today, I'd like you to give me your honest opinions and impressions, even if you disagree with someone else. Since I want to hear from all of you and we have a lot to talk about, I may need to interrupt someone and/or have them wrap up what they are saying as soon as possible to keep to our schedule. It will be easier for us to hear the audio tape if you speak up, try to talk only one person at a time so that other participants are not getting talked over, and identify yourself by your first name before you talk. Also, please put your name tags with your names and gender pronouns (i.e.... she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs, etc...) Does anyone have any questions before we begin?	Review the general rules of focus group discussions (Standard): - Confidentiality – what is said in this room, stays in this room; don't share what anyone said with others who are not here - Only one person talk at a time since we are recording - Be respectful of others; it's OK to have different opinion - Use first names only - Cell phones off

Introduction/IRB:

Thank you for participating in this focus group. The purpose of this focus group is to understand the Challenges and Opportunities Facing Students on the Autism spectrum at UCLA in conjunction with The Intersection of Autism, Ethnicity/Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation as well as what obstacles you overcame to get here as a UCLA student and how you beat those obstacles. We will use the information that you share with us today to have a better understanding of the demographics of our population of students on the spectrum at UCLA. Having said that, the results of this research may contribute to society by increasing our consciousness and understanding of the struggles students on the autism spectrum face in a university setting.

Demographics questionnaire:

Before beginning this session, have you filled-out the demographics questionnaire? For those that have not finished the questionnaire we can go over it at a separate time. However, it is important that it gets completed by every participant.

Introduction of group members:

First let's start by having you tell us about your respective early obstacles you experienced to getting into UCLA.

Evaluation of early challenges:

Now let's talk about your early challenges. What were some obstacles you overcame in the process of getting into UCLA?

PROBES:

1. Family problems?
2. Interpersonal problems?
3. Institutional?
4. Other?

Evaluation of experiences as UCLA student on the autism spectrum.

Now let's talk about your experiences as a UCLA student on the autism spectrum.

1. To what extent do you feel UCLA is accepting towards you as a student on the autism spectrum?

Potential PROBES:

- a. What is it like for you to be on the autism spectrum at UCLA?
- b. What words would you use to describe what campus is like for you to be on the spectrum here?
- c. To what extent do you feel comfortable being recognized as someone on the autism spectrum at UCLA?
- d. Do you have a safe space on campus?
- e. To what extent do you feel there is a sense of an autism spectrum community at UCLA?
- f. How often do you feel socially accepted?

- g. How many friends do you have on campus?
 - h. How do you live student life as someone on the autism spectrum?
 - i. What are your aspirations as a UCLA student?
2. What opportunities do you experience being on the autism spectrum at UCLA?
- PROMPT:
- a. What have been factors making it conducive to enjoy student life here to any extent (since freshman year where applicable)?
3. What obstacles do you experience being on the autism spectrum at UCLA?
- PROMPT:
- a. What have been obstacles to enjoying student life at UCLA (since freshman year where applicable)?

The Intersection of Autism, Ethnicity/Race, Gender, Sexual Orientation and other affiliations participants wish to bring up.

Now let's talk about how you identify yourself in terms of Ethnicity/Race, Gender, Sexual Orientation and other identities participants wish to bring up.

1. How do you identify in terms of race, ethnicity, gender or lack thereof, sexual orientation, ability including if you have any other neurodivergence other than autism, mental health, faith/religion or lack thereof, citizenship status or lack thereof, nationality, culture?
- Potential PROMPTS:
- a. How do you identify your ethnicity?
 - b. Do you feel compelled to identify yourself as a member of a particular race?
 - c. How do you experience yourself as a gendered being for those who identify with a gender?
 - d. How do you experience any of your other social identities when you are among other people on the autism spectrum?
 - e. How do you experience being on the autism spectrum when you are among members of any other communities to which you belong?
 - f. How do you experience your identities in conjunction with each other including autism?
 - g. Do you find UCLA allies that align with other identities?
 - h. Do you find UCLA allies that align with any of your identities?

Moving forward and Future Directions for students on the autism spectrum at UCLA:

Finally, let's address some final thoughts for the Future Directions for students on the autism spectrum at UCLA.

- 1. How would you feel about contributing to the building of an Autism Spectrum Community at UCLA?
- 2. How would you envision such community?
- 3. What do you think is practical for sustaining this Autism Spectrum Community?

4. How do you feel such autism spectrum community can attend to the complexities of its members in conjunction with other communities to which they belong?
5. How do you feel other communities to which students on the autism spectrum belong can attend to the complexities of its members on the autism spectrum?
6. How do you feel we can effectively push for holistic equitable change for students on the autism spectrum at UCLA?

Table1

Participant	Registered with CAE formerly known as OSD	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Sex assigned at birth	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Major Degree	Main Challenge(s)	UCLA Entry/Status	UCLA Housing Experience	Interview Recording Length
P1	Yes	25	Asian/Chinese American	Male	Straight	Man	Asian American Studies B.A.	Academic	Freshman/Senior	yes	2 hours 52 min
P2	Yes	21	American Indian and White/European and Native American	Male	Not Straight	Non-binary	Math B.S.	Social and Institutional	Transfer/Senior	yes	3 hours 30 min
P3	No	26	White/European	Male	Straight	Man	Pre-Economics B.A.	Social	Transfer/Junior	no	3 hours 31 min
P4	Yes	23	White/Middle Eastern and European	Female	Not Straight	Woman	Middle Eastern Studies B.A.	Social	Transfer/Senior	yes	3 hours 22 min
P5	Yes	24	Cuban/Latin American	Female	Straight	Woman	Chemistry M.S.	Academic	Graduate	yes	2 hours 13 min

Figure 1
Dimensions

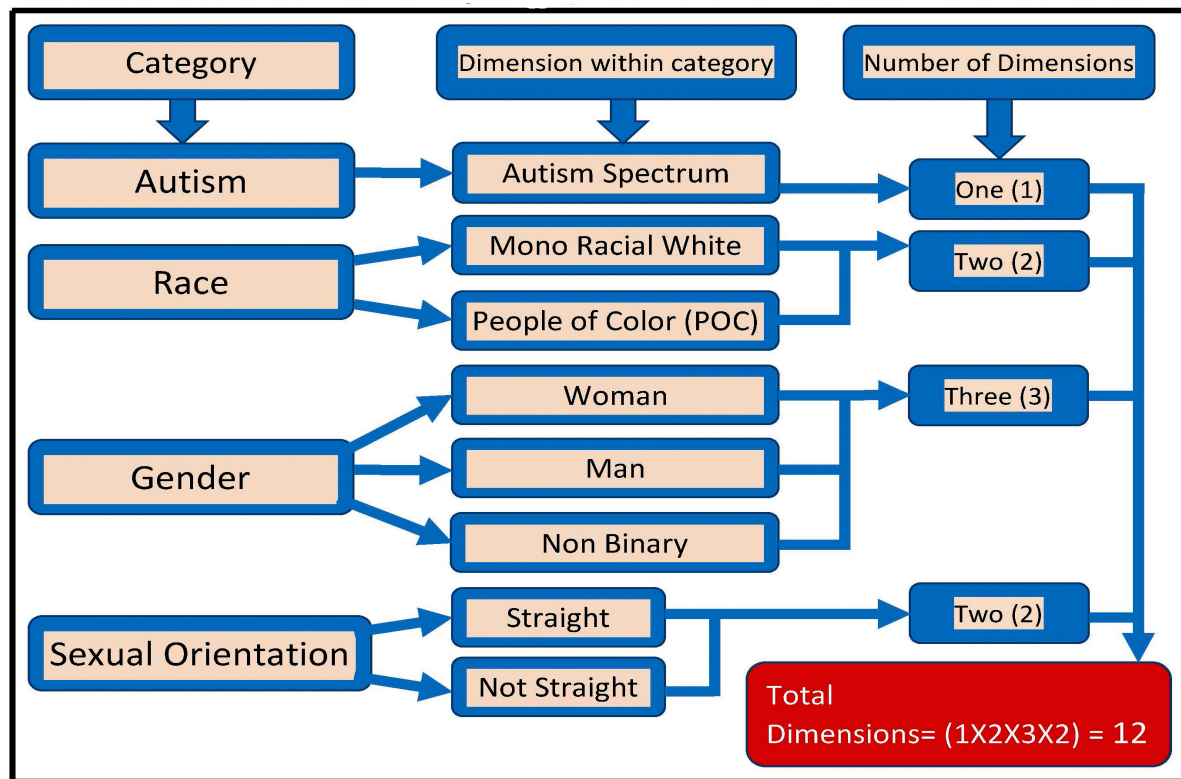


Figure 2
Participants Composition

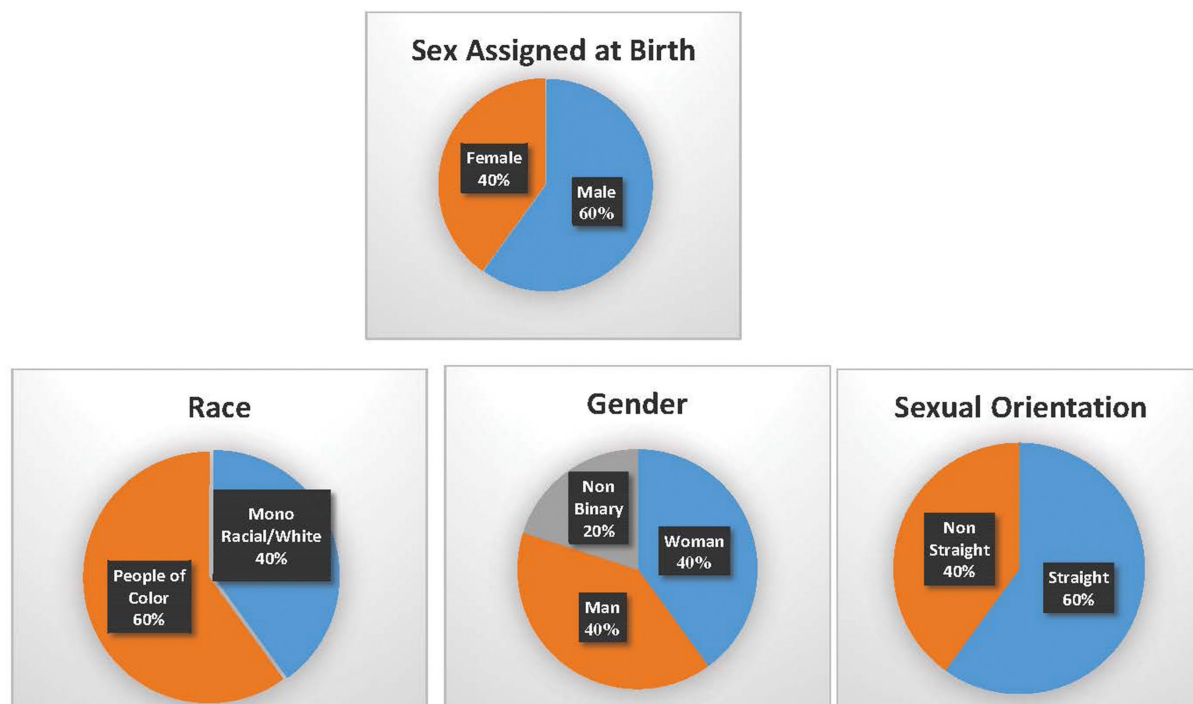
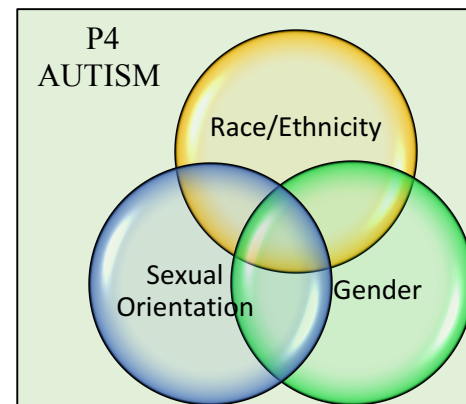
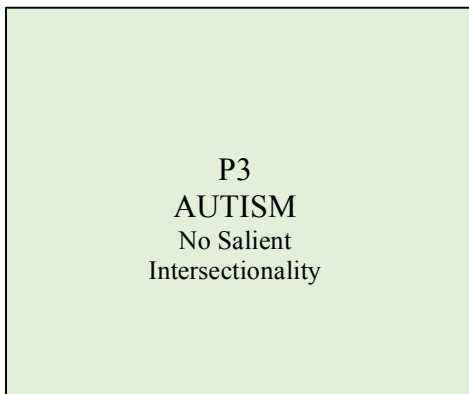
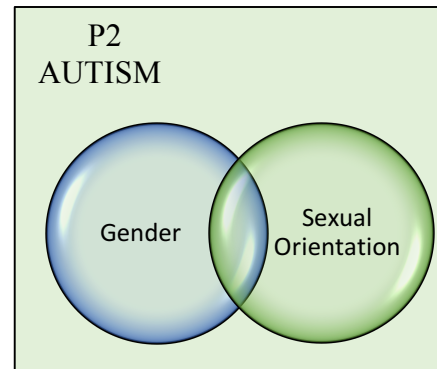
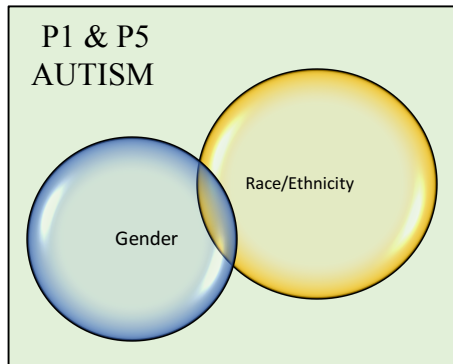


Figure 3
Intersectionality per Participant

P1..... Participant #1
P2..... Participant #2
P3..... Participant #3
P4..... Participant #4
P5..... Participant #5



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