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Dating with Autism:

An Interview Study with Young Adults with Autism Regarding their Romantic Experiences

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Education

by

Siena Elizabeth Whitham

2013

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Dating with Autism:

An Interview Study with Young Adults with Autism Regarding their Romantic Experiences

by

Siena Elizabeth Whitham

Master of Arts in Education

University of California, Los Angeles 2013

Professor Jeffrey Wood, Chair

Only a handful of studies have looked at the lived experiences of adults with autism (Muller, Schuler, & Yates, 2008). To date, no studies have looked at the romantic experiences of adults with autism. This study describes the relationship experiences of young adults with autism. Seven young adults with autism were interviewed about their romantic experiences. The participants were asked questions about their experiences from whom they dated, to how they met, to how they felt about their relationships. The seven transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994). The transcripts revealed six major themes and six minor themes. The six major themes included participants dating partners with developmental disabilities, indiscriminate partner selection, a slow getting to know each other process, fast moving emotional relationships, limited sexual experiences, and unclear beginnings and endings of relationships. Recommendations are made for future research in the field of romantic relationships and adults with autism.

The thesis of Siena Elizabeth Whitham is approved.

Connie Kasari

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University of California, Los Angeles

2013

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Dating with Autism:

An Interview Study with Young Adults with Autism Regarding their Romantic Experiences

Two people meet, fall in love, and spend the rest of their lives together in marital bliss - a story as old as time; however, the story is rarely so simple. In specific, individuals with autism may follow a markedly different romantic trajectory than members of the typically developing population. In recent years, researchers have shown an increased interest in the lived experiences of adults with autism, but the romantic experiences of individuals with autism have yet to be studied.

Three main factors contribute to the dearth of research into romantic experiences of individuals with autism. First, as mentioned above, until recent years, research largely neglected the experiences of adults with autism as a whole. Due to the fact that research has almost exclusively focused on children with autism, little is known about the day-to-day lives of adults with autism (Muller, Schuler, & Yates, 2008). While such research has aided the creation of tremendously effective interventions/therapies to qualitatively improve the lives of children with autism, there remains a troubling shortage of research focused on the longest stage of life – adulthood. In order to improve quality of life for adults with autism, it is imperative that the research community gains further insight into the lives and experiences of such adults. Lately, the research community has begun to shed light on this population, but significant work remains before researchers begin to understand the experiences of adults with autism (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Griffith, Totsika, Nash, & Hastings, 2012).

The second element contributing to the lack of information on the subject is the simple fact that researchers have historically viewed relationship development and further trajectories as

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difficult – if not impossible – to track. For many years, scientists avoided studying romantic relationships due to the belief that such relationships could not be studied in laboratory settings (Berscheid & Kelley, 2002). Although much concerning the development of romantic relationships is still unknown, recent incorporation of other methodological approaches into relationship-oriented research has allowed for more fruitful gains in understanding the nature of such relationships (Collins, 2003). Some theories suggest cross-gender friendships are a common route to romantic relationships; however, these theories do not explain the manner by which individuals enter romantic relationships if they do not have cross-gender friendships. Current research offers no conclusions as to why some initial romantic interactions lead to stable relationships while others do not (Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999). Furthermore, questions remain as to the intersecting roles of personality traits and social settings – particularly regarding the likelihood of introductions to potential romantic partners (e.g. meeting at a church versus at a bar) (Finkel & Eastwick, 2008).

Finally, given the fact that a significant portion of adults with autism have little to no experience with romantic relationships, researchers have strained both to locate and to draw meaningful conclusions about the romantic experiences of this population. In a related study, Farley et al. (2009) conducted a 20-year longitudinal outcomes study involving 41 individuals with autism measured to have average or near-average cognitive abilities. The study found that only six participants (14%) were currently in long-term romantic relationships and twenty-eight participants (66%) had only dated in a group setting or had never dated at all. By contrast, a study by Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, and Kolata (1995) found that two thirds of typically developing individuals had lived with a romantic partner by early adulthood. The stark contrast

between the findings in these studies illustrates that individuals with autism engage in romantic experiences far less frequently than typically developing populations.

Given the studied social complexities of romantic relationships, the rarity of romantic relationship experiences in populations of adults with autism is not surprising. The defining characteristic of autism - social impairment and its accompanying challenges - has not been shown to improve with age (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 1994; Orsmond et al., 2004). The social difficulties experienced by children with autism continue into adulthood; however, given the different social/communal demands of adulthood, manifestation of such social challenges may present differently in adults (Mesibov & Handlan, 1997; Stokes, Newton, & Kaur, 2007). For many individuals, the transition from childhood to young adulthood brings about a change in social networks and priorities. School is no longer the center of the social environment. Instead, independent living, employment, and fostering intimate relationships - including romantic relationships - receive increased focus (Arnett, 2000; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). With increased pressure on romantic relationships, romantic experiences become more serious and intimate in young adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Thus, the increased centrality of romantic relationships in young adulthood brings heightened focus, interest, and challenges for young adults with autism. Studies have shown that individuals with autism desire romantic relationships (Stokes & Kaur, 2005), yet little is known about how young adults with autism navigate these experiences.

A 2007 study compared the romantic practices of individuals with autism to typically developing individuals using parent report (Stokes et al., 2007), revealing several key differences between individuals with autism and typically developing individuals. A typically developing individual generally engaged in a handful of appropriate behaviors toward a specific person in

whom s/he was romantically interested. Conversely, individuals with autism engaged in a greater number of inappropriate courtship behaviors (i.e. inappropriate touch, showing obsessional interest, following them) than typically developing individuals (Stokes et al., 2007). In addition, results showed a significant difference between the two groups regarding the type of person they chose to romantically pursue (Stokes et al., 2007). Individuals with autism were shown to disproportionally pursue more inappropriate partners, such as celebrities (Stokes et al., 2007). Additionally, when presented with a negative response or in the absence of a response, individuals with autism often maintained pursuit for longer periods of time than typically developing individuals deemed decorous (Stokes et al., 2007). Finally, the study revealed that individuals with autism relied less often upon behaviors that require interpersonal contact to pursue romantic interests (i.e. phoning or directly asking for a date). The behavioral differences identified by Stokes et al. (2007) suggested that individuals with autism have difficulty discriminating appropriate from inappropriate as they relate to dating practices and partners.

Despite the aforementioned behavioral differences identified by Stokes et al. (2007), significant questions remain due to methodological concerns. As with Stokes et al. (2007), to date, the available research on romantic and sexual experiences of individuals with autism has primarily relied on caregiver report and has focused on challenges for individuals with autism (e.g. Stokes & Kaur, 2005; Stokes et al., 2007). Given that young adults may not tell their caregiver about their dating and relationship practices, caregiver report is likely a more unreliable method of learning about these experiences.

This study seeks to explore the romantic relationship experiences of young adults with autism. Seven in-depth interviews were conducted with young adults with autism who self-identified as having had previous romantic experiences. The interviews focused on selection of

partners, initiation of romantic involvement, relationship content, the young adults' cognitions and emotions about the relationships, and the manner in which intimacy was expressed in the relationship based on previous literature pertaining to adolescent romantic relationships (Collins, 2003). Collins (2003) established a five-feature framework to conceptualize the developmental significance of adolescent romantic relationships. Collins' (2003) adolescent relationship framework is germane to the population in this paper for two reasons. First, the existing literature on romantic relationships in young adulthood offers no theoretical framework for relationship development and maintenance. In typical populations, romantic relationships often begin in adolescence, thus research in this area has traditionally focused on the adolescent developmental period. Second, the developmental trajectories of sexual behaviors have been shown to have a 5-year delay for individuals with autism, thus making an adolescent framework developmentally appropriate for this population (Stokes & Kaur, 2005).

The five features composing Collins' (2003) framework are involvement, partner selection, content, quality, and cognitive and emotional processes of romantic relationships. The first feature, involvement, refers to whether or not an individual dates, the age at which dating begins, and the frequency and duration of dating and relationships. Of the literature on romantic relationships this particular feature of Collins' (2003) framework is the most frequently studied, and it has been shown to correlate with markers of individual functioning (Collins, 2003). Although often scrutinized, involvement does not provide information on the developmental significance of applicable relationships. The second feature, partner selection, refers to the individuals with whom romantic relationships are entered into. The partner with whom an individual enters a romantic relationship will influence the developmental significance of the relationship (Collins, 2003) similar to the way a friend's identity will influence the significance

of a friendship (Hartup, 1996). The third feature, content, refers to the activities that partners

both share and do not share in a romantic relationship. Shared activities include joint enterprises,

places traveled together, diversity of activities shared, as well as activities not shared. Couples

sharing more activities usually display more interdependence when compared to partners who

share fewer activities (Collins, 2003). Analyzing the manner in which partners allocate time to

themselves and one another yields an enhanced understanding of the grounds of the relationship

(Collins, 2003). The fourth feature, quality, refers to the degree in which the relationship

provides beneficial experiences. High-quality romantic relationships are characterized by,

"intimacy, affection, and nurturance" and are associated with measures of functioning and well

being (Collins, 2003, p. 11). Low-quality romantic relationships are characterized by, "irritation,

antagonism, and notably high levels of conflict and/or controlling behavior" and are associated

with negative outcomes (Collins, 2003, p. 11). The final feature, cognitive and emotional

processes, refers to the emotional and cognitive responses to the relationship, which include the

"perceptions, expectancies, schemata, and attributions regarding oneself, the other person, and

the relationship" (Collins, 2003, p. 11). In a romantic relationship, one's cognitions and emotions

are highly intertwined. Positive romantic emotions are heightened when a person's cognitions

and emotions about a romantic relationship align with his/her idealized view of relationships.

Divergence from the idealized romantic script can lead to negative emotional outcomes. This

study utilizes the five-feature framework in order to organize and explain the interview data.

Methods

Participants

Seven young adults (1 woman, 6 men) ranging from 21-27 years of age from a large

metropolitan area in Southern California were interviewed. Two participants' had a formal

diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome and five participants' had a formal diagnosis of Autism. All of the participants attended at least some form of post-secondary education. Five participants are currently employed. Five participants self-identified as Caucasian, one participant self-identified as bi-racial and one participant self-identified as Middle Eastern. Criteria for inclusion in the study included: (a) be 18-29 years of age; (b) have a formal diagnosis on an Autism Spectrum Disorder; (c) be fluent in English; (d) self-identify as having had previous romantic relationship experience. The participants were selected based on a sample of convenience given the rarity of participants who fit the inclusion criteria.

Thomas: 21 year old Caucasian male. He had a formal diagnosis of Autism. Thomas was on his summer break before returning to college to start his junior. While attending school, Thomas held a part-time job at his college. He was a lively young man who easily agreed to be interviewed about his dating experiences. He expressed no concerns or hesitation about discussing his previous dating experiences. Thomas was able to easily articulate both challenges and successes he had experienced when attempting to date. He was self-aware and reflected on his previous dating experiences in order to learn and grow. The interview with Thomas flowed easily and lasted 62 minutes.

Eric: 27 year old Middle Eastern male. He had a formal diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome. He previously attended community college for two years. He stated that he currently worked as a social group leader with other adults with autism. Eric was eager to share his dating experiences. He easily articulated his dating experiences, both successful and unsuccessful in easily comprehensible manner. He expressed both his thoughts and feelings about his relationships clearly. The interview with Eric lasted 58 minutes.

Joshua: 26 year old Caucasian male. He had a formal diagnosis of Autism. He previously attended a residential university certificate program for people with developmental disabilities. He has been employed for the past two years in the customer service industry. Joshua was able to describe his previous dating experiences; however, he needed more prompting in order to obtain a full, comprehensive narrative of his relationship experiences. The interview with Joshua lasted 27 minutes.

Andrew: 25 year old Caucasian male. He had a formal diagnosis of Autism. He previously attended a residential university certificate program for people with developmental disabilities. He has been employed for the past year in the administration industry. Andrew easily discussed his previous dating experiences. He described his experiences concisely, but with appropriate detail, without requiring much prompting. The interview with Andrew lasted 33 minutes.

Mark: 23 year old Caucasian male. He had a formal diagnosis of Autism. He previously attended a residential university certificate program for people with developmental disabilities. He was currently employed. Mark was able to describe his previous dating experience, but in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of his past relationship many follow-up and clarifying questions were required. Mark was not able to express tremendous insight into the nature of his previous relationship. The interview with Mark lasted 23 minutes.

Abigail: 25 year old biracial (Caucasian/Asian) female. She had a formal diagnosis of Autism. Abigail was currently enrolled in community college. She was not employed. Abigail was able to relay tremendous details and in-depth information about her previous relationships; however, she did have difficulty verbalizing her thoughts. Her sentences were often disjointed, but despite this she was able to comprehensively describe the details of her previous

relationships, including how she felt about the relationships. The interview with Abigail lasted 74 minutes.

Patrick: 26 year old Caucasian male. He indicated that he had a formal diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome. He graduated from a four-year university with a bachelor's of arts. He had been self-employed for the past 8 years. Patrick was extremely articulate. He was able to describe his previous relationships in detail, including his feelings and thoughts about the relationships. The interview with Patrick lasted 66 minutes.

Participants were recruited from by distributing flyers to organizations based in Southern California. The flyer had the researcher's contact information and it requested that participants contact the researcher if they were interested in participating. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained to recruit and interview young adults with autism about their dating experiences.

Procedure

Interviews were carried out with the young adults in a location that was convenient for the participants. The interviews were audio recorded with consent from the participants. Before beginning the interview, the participants completed a background information sheet. The interview protocol was created for the purpose of this study. For the initial interview prompt, the interviewer explained to the participant s/he was interested in learning about the participant's relationship experiences. The interviewer then provided the participant with possible relationship options, from beginning with the participant's first relationship experience, to beginning with the participant's most recent experience, to beginning with any experience that the participant wanted to talk about the most. Once the participant chose an experience, the interview explained that s/he was hoping to be able to picture what the relationship looked like, from how it began, to

how it developed over time, to how the participant felt about it. Then the interview asked, "Can you tell me the story of your relationship?" Once the participant told his/her complete relationship story, the interviewer asked pertinent follow-up questions based on the information provided by the participant. The follow-up questions were meant to help guide the interview if the participant did not freely provide a detailed account of his/her relationship experience. The questions were open ended and ranged from how the relationship began to how the participant felt about the relationship and his/her partner. The interviews lasted from 23 to 74 minutes (mean = 49 minutes) and were one time interviews.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined in Braun & Clark's (2006) paper on thematic analysis to provide a rich description of the interview data. Thematic analysis focuses on identifying themes and patterns within a data set (Aronson, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006). A theoretic thematic analysis was conducted using Collins (2003) framework on romantic relationships to guide the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each of the seven transcripts was originally read to identify data that fit into Collins' (2003) five-feature framework. Once the data was organized into the framework, the data was read and reread using an iterative process in order to identify themes and subthemes within each feature of the framework. Themes were identified by comparing and contrasting data across participants within each feature to identify common experiences across participants. Analysis revealed both major and minor themes. Major themes were defined as themes that were discussed by more than four of the participants and minor themes were themes that were discussed by four or less of the participants. After identifying themes based on the theoretical thematic analysis, the entire interview data set was

reread to see if inductive themes emerged, apart from the themes based on the framework. Both

themes within Collins' (2003) framework and inductive themes are discussed.

Results

The interviews generated rich data and numerous themes relating to the relationship

experiences of young adults with autism. A number of the themes generated fit into Collins'

(2003) framework; however, a few of the themes were unique in nature and they did not fit into

Collins' (2003) framework. These themes were inductive and unique to the experiences of the

participants. Themes are presented within the framework when applicable. When providing

quotes from the interviews the following conventions are used:

- Short pause: . . .

- Explanatory information provided by authors: [text]

- Words omitted to shorten quote: (. . .)

Involvement

Forward partners (n = 4)

Four participants endorsed getting into romantic relationships with partners, all women,

who pursued them. Three of the four participants who described this experience lived in a

structured setting with other people who self-identify as having developmental disabilities. Each

of these four participants had not expressed interest in the partners, nor had the partners

expressed interest in them before the partners asked them out.

> ANDREW: It was kind of a shock. I mean, she never really seemed to talk to me like she
> liked me. I mean, she talked to me here and there but she didn't actually look at me like
> she really wanted me...And then I was hanging with a few people and then she came out
> and asked me out.

By being pursued by their partners, the participants did not have to navigate the social

complexities of asking someone out. Instead each of these participants was able to get into a

romantic relationship without having to do the pursuing.

> PATRICK: For some reason she messaged me just to say that she thinks that I'm
> awesome. And I'd like to meet you. So I met her, like wow, ok. So we just started
> seeing each other.

Slow getting to know you process (n=7)

All of the participants endorsed having the experience of getting into a romantic

relationship after getting to know a person slowly over time.

> ANDREW: [I knew her for] a little over a year. She and I had a pretty good friendship
> during what was my first year and what was her second year. Um, well, I had heard that
> she broke up with her boyfriend and I felt bad and sad for her and I told her that I'm
> available if she ever wants someone and yeah, it kind of happened that way.

Participants who entered romantic relationships slowly appeared to have greater knowledge and

more commonalities with their partners.

> PATRICK: [I] sent her an email about just like, out of curiosity about her art. And
> somehow we just kept emailing each other, and I guess it just went on for a while. And
> eventually, we met in person at a dinner… At least with her, being in a relationship it
> was, it was a very, it was good because we were both very artistic and supportive of each
> other's like art. You know, she supported my films, and I supported her paintings.

The length of time that participants got to know their partners varied from two weeks to several

years. Participants got to know their romantic partners in many different ways, from school, to

social groups, to living near them, to church.

> ABIGAIL: I went to this program called…social group. And then, and then I met the boy
> called Kyle. And then…so in January, so we went to, we were together.

Involvement in social groups, attending school and church, and living near individuals around the same age allowed the participants to meet other young adults with whom they got to know slowly and eventually ended up dating.

Intentional practice (n=2)

Two participants described pursuing romantic relationships in a very systematic manner. Each of the participants discussed intentionally practicing their dating skills in order to become more successful at pursuing romantic partners.

> ERIC: And so I don't know, I had this brilliant idea that I would probably more easily find my type of girl at the anime expo and we'll have similar interests. So I actually went to anime expo, with the goal of just trying to talk to a lot of girls. And maybe meeting someone there. I was really going to put myself out there…I talked to over 30 girls. I was really working on it; see I had to mentally prepare myself for it. I did a lot of different things…I would go up to myself in front of the mirror and pretend that the mirror was a girl, so I was me going up to the girl....I also talked to my friend over the phone. On the phone she and I would practice scenarios on things I would say. She gave me some great ideas, like she'd say, "okay a basic one was I would wear a costume just to try to blend in because a lot of people in anime expo wear costumes. So I was like, "If I wore a costume people would be more accepting of me". If I didn't wear a costume, people would be like, "Well I don't know who this guy is" so I thought costume's good, it's like a trademark of something. And the basic approach is, most of the girls I ended up approaching were in a costume, because that's really the easiest to approach. But I got good results approaching a couple girls without costumes. Actually it's easier, well harder to approach, but sometimes better because the girls without costumes aren't getting approached as much. The girl in a costume gets approached by all sorts of people asking for a picture or guys getting on them or whatever I don't know. So the basic approach would be like, "oh you have a nice costume" to the person that you see. And then my friend suggested something like this. It was actually kind of true, or ended up being true, like asking "You look like someone that's the anime expo before" and they'll be like, "Yea I have" And I'll be like "I'm actually new to the program, so can you help me figure out what to do?" Yea it was actually a very effective strategy.

This participant took different approaches in order to improve his chances of meeting a potential romantic partner. He chose an event where he felt he was likely to meet partners that he would be interested in and that would be interested in him, as well as, an event that was socially conducive to meeting new people. He also took several different approaches to practice talking

to women. The other participant who described overtly practicing dating skills also took several

different tactical approaches to learning how to meet and talk to women.

> PATRICK: Yeah, that's the other thing. It's the only way that I ever was able to like start dating people. By literally like talking to people pretty much every day. You know, trying to ask people out on dates. And for, while I was in college, I was like, listen, you know, this is like fairly deciding that I need a fix in my life. I don't know really what to do. So I'm just gonna study other guys who are doing it, and try as many different things …Yeah, well the thing is I made an effort to meet other guys who like, I was like that guy probably gets a lot of girls, or whatever you know. And I'm gonna befriend him, and go out with him, and study what he's doing. So I would actually do that. I would go out with these guys who would go up to girls, and like in the club take her home, pretty much once a week…Yeah I fucking, like I told you I would go out on like a, not only a weekly basis, but some weeks I would go out like every night to clubs and just like, you know [practice]. And if you're doing that, it doesn't matter if you're like the most socially inept person in the world. You're gonna eventually learn, like, or at least just randomly have some girl that like, I don't know. Is like really horny, and then find someone. You'll just like randomly find that girl, and she'll go home with you, and you'll get some sort of confidence and maybe be more comfortable doing it. But if you're never going out, if you're sitting at home doing like video games.

This participant emphasized the importance of going out into the world to practice talking to

potential partners. He expressed the belief that it was through practice that he became

comfortable approaching women who he was interested in dating.

Partner Selection

Partners with developmental disabilities (n=5)

Participants described their romantic partners in numerous different ways; however, there

was one commonality across many of the participants. Five of the participants endorsed that their

partners had some type of developmental disability. The developmental disabilities ranged from

learning disabilities, to Williams Syndrome, to Autism Spectrum Disorder.

> ERIC: She said she had an Asperger's diagnosis.

> ANDREW: Heather had Williams Syndrome and Lindsay had some sort of learning disabilities.

PATRICK: Yeah, I think she had an autism diagnosis, at some point.

Despite this, none of the participants voluntarily shared this information. When directly asked, participants were open about their partners' developmental disabilities, but participants across the board did not think that their partners' development disability was relevant or important in their relationship.

JOSHUA: She had some sort of learning disability. Not sure which one. It wasn't very relevant.

The lack of mention by any of the participants about their partners' developmental disabilities emphasized the insignificance that participants placed on these labels.

Indiscriminate partner selection (n=5)

When describing the process of selecting romantic partners, five of the participants described a willingness to date whoever was interested in them, without taking into consideration their feelings towards the partner.

ANDREW: The funny thing is, no. Eight years prior to that, you know, I had a crush on that girl from middle school. Between then and then, I just decided that every second I gotta have a woman in my life. I didn't think about taking it slow. I just said I gotta have a woman. So when the opportunity arose that very minute, I didn't really think about any pros or cons. I just said yes after like 30-45 seconds after she asked me out.

Many of the participants discussed feeling so excited to have someone interested in them that they automatically agreed to date the person who was interested in them. Often these participants did not really know the person who asked them out. Additionally, one participant discussed being open to dating many different women, despite having greater feeling for one partner.

THOMAS: I can definitely I can definitely see myself with any three of them but I prefer Sarah if she…if she's available

His willingness to date any of three women even though he had greater feelings for one of the women suggests that the desire to date someone overrode his desire to date the person he liked the most.

Content

Fast moving emotional relationships (n=6)

All but one of the participants' described being part of a romantic relationship where they or their partner discussed emotions early on in the relationship. Many of the participants described discussing marriage and/or love within the first few weeks of the relationship.

> ERIC: [I told her I loved her] hm, hm, I think after about three weeks, actually…Um, well I also wanted to marry her after um about two months.

The discussion of serious emotions occurred both in relationships where the partners were together for longer period of time (e.g. one year) and in relationships that ended relatively quickly (e.g. one month).

> JOSHUA: [We started discussing marriage] like two weeks after we first hooked up, which I thought was way too soon… I wasn't really sure what I wanted yet, but with relationships, we expected to get married, but I thought that she was kind of rushing the relationship, so she can kind of have some ownership in it not working out too… [The relationship] lasted like a month then she started having panic attacks. It was her first time living away from home. And she was always threatening to kill herself. I would dissuade her by telling her I loved her too much to let her kill herself.

As exemplified by Joshua, the discussion of marriage and serious emotions, like love, occurred early in many of the relationships and these topics did not always appear connected to the quality or content of the relationship.

Limited sexual experiences (n=5)

When describing intimacy in their relationships, all seven of the participants discussed their sexual experiences, with five participants endorsing having only either cuddled or kissed their partners.

> ANDREW: We just sat on the couch together, very close. That was about it. I don't think we ever kissed, though.

> THOMAS: Yeah she is like the first girl I've held hands with but like I've actually never had my first kiss yet either.

> ABIGAIL: Mm, well we didn't kiss. Well hugging a little bit.

The relationships in which participants began to experience sexual intimacy varied in length from a longer period of time (e.g. one year) to very short encounters (e.g. two dates).

Quality

Getting stuck on little things (n=4)

Four of the participants' described feeling negatively towards their partners over seemingly minor issues. Each of these participants remembered and described getting frustrated at their partners over issues that others may not perceive as serious. The issues that made each of these participants feel negatively varied, but each of these participants expressed to their partners their negative feelings about the issues.

> JOSHUA: There was one time when she borrowed 5 dollars to take the bus, and to this day I haven't seen a penny of that. That wasn't the straw that broke the camel's back, but it certainly didn't help things. If you're gonna borrow money from me, you have to pay me back.

> ANDREW: I just said you're welcome to call me, but try to keep the calls to a minimum. I'm a busy man. I can't always answer your calls all the time.

> MARK: When she wore her hair in a braid too much. And then a bun a lot. I didn't feel comfortable with her wearing her hair up.

As exemplified by the participants' descriptions, the negative emotions that the participants' felt

about these minor issues persisted into the present day.

Cognitive and Emotional Processes

Learning from experience (n=4)

Four of the participants discussed the different ways that they learned from the

relationship experiences. These learning experiences were brought up naturally by the

participants. Often, the participants would describe a behavior they engaged in a previous

relationship and then automatically critique their previous behavior.

> THOMAS: I was like okay better step up [and ask her out] but then I don't know
> Valentine's Day kinda ruined that whole thing. I just asked [my roommate] for advice
> with like what to do and he said to do something that would stand out but I think that
> might have creeped her out a little bit, looking back.

In addition to criticizing their previous behavior, participants shared insights on their previous

experiences.

> THOMAS: I know that I like kept asking her [out] through like through texts and stuff
> but she always said she was busy. I would ask her to come over, go to the mall, stuff like
> that. I'd try to [ask her out] only once a week but even that seems like I'd be pestering
> them…I think she was just making excuses at that point, looking back now.

Based on the four participants' reflections on their relationship experiences, participants were

learning from their previous experiences and gaining knowledge for future relationship

experiences.

Immature emotional intimacy (n=4)

When asked how they expressed intimacy in their relationship, the participants often

expressed their love and commitment to the partner with grand, romanticized language or they

described engaging in grand gestures in order to show their feelings for their partner.

ERIC: Yeah, um. I really wanted to make her happy. So, I would sometimes get her like, I'd sometimes make things for her or <um> you know like I wrote a short story for her. Ah, I would you know give her like flowers sometimes, not like a thing of flowers but like a single like rose or something…So um, and so yeah I definitely try to you know show, you know try to do different things for her.

JOSHUA: Yeah, and I would dissuade her by telling her I loved her too much to let her kill herself.

The description of grand gestures and language in the relationship highlights the participants' developing understanding of emotional intimacy. The participants described intimacy as grand gestures or proclamations of love.

Inductive Themes

Utilizing social support networks (n=4)

Four participants utilized social support networks when navigating challenging aspects of their romantic relationships. The participants described both getting advice and following the examples of people in their social networks.

THOMAS: and then umm my friend, my other best friend Ben he was getting into a relationship with a girl who he is still with now at the time and I kinda followed his example. Like he didn't bring his phone with him to Silver Lake when me, him, and Ryan went to there for vacation for a week. So I texted her when I got back and then I did the same thing for her [as Ben].

Participants' social support networks ranged from friends, to parents, to independent living counselors.

ANDREW: And then, by 2 months, I just thought I couldn't do this any more. And I got advice from my mom and a few other people in my support system on how to handle the situation...We had a meeting about it. [The meeting] was Lindsay and myself, and my support system and her support system. [In my support system] I have my parents, my regional center counselor, my Independent Living Services counselor. My parents didn't come to the meeting. I think it was my Independent Living Services counselor and Lindsay's Independent Living Services counselor and so we kind of just had a little meeting to try and straighten things out.

Each of the participants relied on their social support networks to varying degrees and in different ways, but they each used their network to support them when progressing through challenging or confusing aspects of their romantic experiences.

Unclear beginnings and endings (n=5)

Five of the participants were unsure, unclear and/or could not able to remember the beginning or the end of their relationships.

> JOSHUA: I only found out from her cousin, who's also on the spectrum, that she dumped me.

Additionally, several participants who described their partner as their boyfriend or girlfriend were unsure, unclear, and/or could not remember if they had a conversation about becoming boyfriend/girlfriend.

> MARK: I don't know how I figured that out [that she was my girlfriend].

> PATRICK: Yeah, yeah. We were exclusive. Yeah, pretty much. I would assume that. I was exclusive, I assume that she was. We didn't talk about exclusivity, really. I never, I don't really ever bring that up unless it's like someone else does. She never really even thought of it

This gap in knowledge or memory about the transition into a relationship or out of a relationship suggests that these transitional moments may not be as important or salient for people with autism.

Discussion

The current findings provide insight into the nature of romantic experiences of young adults with autism. The themes that emerged from the seven in-depth interviews provide preliminary indications of the manner in which young adults with autism think about and

navigate romantic experiences. Each of the young adults in this study discussed initiating

romantic relationships by getting to know a partner over a long period of time. However,

participants also indicated that they entered relationships with other partners quickly, before

getting to know the person and assessing their compatibility. Participants' accounts illustrate the

ways that romantic experiences of young adults with autism are similar to other typically

developing young adults as well as unique to the specific experiences as individuals on the

autism spectrum.

Involvement

Participants identified three distinct approaches to entering romantic relationships.

Collins' (2003) study suggested that the first feature of the framework, involvement, is not

central to understanding the developmental significance of relationships for typically developing

adolescents; however, for young adults with autism, one of the greatest hurdles to romantic

intimacy is the initiation phase, evidenced by the Farley et al. (2009) follow-up study in which

66% of adult participants self-identified as only having been on a group date or never having

dated at all. Thus, understanding the ways in which romantic involvement occurs for young

adults with autism is central to augmenting understanding of the romantic relationship

experiences of individuals with autism. The most pervasive experience, endorsed by all of the

participants, was a process by which participants became acquainted with partners over an

extended period of time. Each participant had the experience of getting to know someone

through a club, school, or through a living arrangement, allowing gradual transition from a

platonic to romantic relationship.

This slow approach to entering romantic relationships has been established in research

pertaining to relationships of typically developing individuals (Guerrero & Mongeau, 2008);

however, it had yet to be established as a successful approach for individuals with autism. The data from this study suggests that the pattern of meeting and getting to know a partner slowly is a common approach for young adults with autism.

The two other relationship approaches endorsed by participants were less common, and suggested that a sub-group of young adults with autism develop romantic relationships through forward partners and/or through an intentional practice approach. Four participants stated that they entered a romantic relationship when a partner asked them out. Although this is a common dating initiation approach, in each of these cases, the partner had not engaged in behaviors that suggested or insinuated that they were interested in the participants (i.e. talking or flirting with the participants). The participants knew very little about the partners when they were asked out, yet they quickly agreed to go out on a date or even to enter into a formal romantic relationship with such forward partners. A study by Eastwick, Finkel, Mochon, & Ariely (2007) suggested that individuals develop romantic desire towards partners who appear interested in them; however, this romantic desire only occurs when the individual perceives the partners' interest as unique to them, not generalized towards several people. Similar to the participants in the Eastwick et al. (2007) study, participants in this study showed romantic desire when partners expressed interest in them; however, it is unclear whether the partner's romantic interest was unique to the participants in this study. Based on the descriptions by the participants, the partners may have expressed a generalized interest toward several people and the individuals with autism failed to perceive the undiscriminating nature of the partners' interest, as the participants in the Eastwick et al. (2007) study perceived. Participants' quick agreement demonstrated that they were eager and willing to enter into a relationship prior to assessing their level of interest or compatibility with the partner. The eagerness illustrated by the aforementioned behavior had

both positive and negative outcomes for the study participants. The willingness to enter a relationship with any interested partner allowed them to gain desired dating and relationship experience; however, the lack of inhibition exhibited also hindered participants from assessing possible negative characteristics of dating the partners.

Two participants described seeking out potential partners by purposefully practicing dating skills. The participants practiced methods of approaching a potential partner, engaging in conversation, and finally asking the potential partner for their contact information or out on a date. When the participants described practicing these skills, they articulated that their practice was both systematic and conscious. The participants purposefully observed others who gave the appearance of successful interactions with potential romantic partners in order to learn and mimic such strategies. Participants acknowledged practicing by talking to themselves and asking themselves out in the mirror, they practiced with friends, and when they felt ready, they acknowledged practicing the aforementioned skills in live situations where they could meet potential romantic partners. A study by Clark, Shaver & Abrahams (1999) showed that individuals with previous successful relationship initiation experience possess copious different initiation strategies, including direct tactics such as requesting a date and indirect tactics such as flirting. The diversity of options allows them a varied approach depending on the situation and partner. Although the directionality of Clark et al.'s (1999) finding is unclear, it suggests individuals cognizant of diverse initiation strategies are successful at relationship initiation. For individuals with autism, successful relationship initiation strategies are unlikely to be innately understood and executed. More than likely, individuals with autism would learn such strategies through practice rather than through innate knowledge or previous experience. The systematic

approach taken by the aforementioned two participants in finding a romantic partner may be an important model for other young adults with autism to emulate.

Partner Selection

In the current study, five participants acknowledged dating partners with developmental disabilities. Many of these same participants also described dating participants without developmental disabilities, meaning participants described having the experience of dating partners both with and without developmental disabilities. The experience of dating partners with and without developmental disabilities is consistent with the participants' belief that their partners' disability status was not relevant or important in their relationships. Given that very few of the romantic experiences described were long-term relationships, it remains unclear how the partners' disability status impacted the quality or longevity of the romantic relationships. Furthermore, participants not only described a lack of concern about disability status, but described a willingness to date whoever expressed interest in them regardless of the potential romantic partner's personal characteristics. Participants expressed palpable excitement and eagerness regarding the opportunity to engage in a romantic experience, which appeared to temper any desire for increased partner selectivity. Studies on adult romantic relationship have indicated the importance of partner selection in that it represents a developmental turning point in an adult's life (Rutter, 1996). Thus, given the importance of partner characteristics in a romantic partnership, the apparent lack of partner selectivity exhibited by young adults with autism may be problematic (Rutter, 1996). Striking a balance between conscientious receptiveness and judicious selectivity towards potential partners may be important for young adults with autism when pursuing a romantic relationship.

Content

In the study, six participants described participating in fast-moving emotional relationships, such that they immediately entered into a formal relationship whereby they referred to their partner as their boyfriend or girlfriend and/or discussed love and marriage within the first few weeks of the relationship. In each case, the quick emotional progression of the relationship did not coincide with increased shared activities amongst romantic partners. In typical romantic relationships, greater interdependence occurs when a couples share a wider variety of activities (Collins, 2003); however, for many of the participants in this study, the relationship's progression from meeting, to familiarity, to monogamous relationship, to increased emotional and sexual intimacy was not associated with greater participation in shared activities. Rather, the relationships accelerated quickly into exclusive partnerships without an increase in time and activities shared amongst partners.

By contrast, study participants revealed that sexual experiences shared with romantic partners emerged slowly and in very limited scope. Five participants described their sexual experience as limited to hugging and kissing. Such limited sexual experiences shared by participants and romantic partners stand in stark contrast to the accelerated nature of their emotional relationships. Studies have shown that in typically developing adult relationships, increased sexual activity is associated with increased emotional closeness (Christopher & Frandsen, 1990). However, for the participants in this study, increased emotional intimacy did not coincide with increased sexual activity.

Quality

Four participants described experiencing difficulties with their partners over seemingly minor issues. The negative emotionality expressed over these minute challenges suggested that participants experienced difficulty with compromise in their relationships. One participant

expressed irritation over an instance in which a partner borrowed five dollars and did not pay him back. Another participant stated that he fought with his girlfriend when she changed her hairstyle. Such examples demonstrate a level of rigidity and inflexibility characteristic of individuals with autism. Restrictive and repetitive behaviors and interests are a core domain of autism - characterized by both repetitive sensory/motor behaviors and insistence on sameness (Cuccaro, Shao, Grubber, Slifer, Wolpert, & Donnelly et al., 2003; Szatmari, Georgiades, Bryson, Zwaigenbaum, Roberts, & Mahoney et al., 2006). Minor rule violations or changes in environment can prove very upsetting for individuals with autism. Thus, overlooking small relationship issues proved challenging for some study participants. Several participants expressed frustration at the difficulty of navigating the sometimes contentious interpersonal give-and-take characteristic of romantic relationships. In order to enter into and maintain positive romantic relationships, it may be beneficial for young adults with autism to learn the importance of compromise.

Cognitive and Emotional Processes

Participants appeared to learn and grow from their romantic experiences while maintaining a somewhat idealized view of romantic relationships. The romanticized language participants used to describe their relationships and their views on relationships suggested a belief in grand, fairytale-like romances, yet their experience of romantic relationships did not adhere to any fairytale framework. From the participants' descriptions of experiences in romantic relationships it appeared as though several participants were actively reflecting upon and adjusting to romantic relationships based on their previous experiences. Four participants articulated having grown and learned from their mistakes and experiences. The demonstration of self-reflection is vital, as self-reflection is commonly recognized as the mechanism by which

individuals come to adapt behaviors and cognitions as a result of prior experiences (Bandura, 1986). The participants' self-reflection on previous romantic experiences provides them the opportunity to alter their behavior in future relationships.

Inductive Themes

In the current study, participants described utilizing social support networks to gain insight and assistance in navigating dating and romantic relationship experiences. Four participants utilized such social support networks to learn about relationships. Thus, they were able to avoid a haphazard, trial and error method of self-tutelage. By seeking out information from parents, counselors, and friends, participants were more equipped to navigate the complexities of the dating world. In studies of typically developing individuals, research has shown that greater social support is associated with less relationship dissolution (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). As described by several participants, the use of social supports represents a relationship pattern similar to that of typically developing young adults. Additionally, participants described utilizing more formal social supports such as counselors when navigating romantic relationships. Making use of such formal support structures may represent a unique social support component utilized by some individuals with autism.

Five participants in this study were not able to recall critical turning points in their relationships. The participants could not describe how their relationships began and/or ended. The recall difficulty exhibited by some participants was surprising given that the transition into or out of a relationship is commonly very memorable. Given the salient nature of turning points in romantic relationships, Baxter and Bullis (1986) utilized turning points as their unit of analysis for understanding the development of romantic relationships for typical adults. Baxter and Bullis (1986) found that, "participants are able to identify those turning points that they consider

meaningful in their relational histories." (p. 486). The beginning or ending of a romantic

relationship is a significant turning point, thus it is unclear why these five participants did not

know how their relationships began or ended. This study cannot expound upon whether young

adults with autism were simply less likely to have conversations about the beginnings/endings of

relationships, thereby confounding the process of remembering seemingly pivotal events, or if

the participants were simply less likely to remember these conversations. Furthermore, it is not

clear whether the memory gap surrounding these turning points is due to a diminished perception

of significance or due to a more specific memory deficit. To the latter possibility, studies have

shown that individuals with autism have impaired autobiographical memory (Lind, 2010).

Deficits in autobiographical memory could explain the difficulty participants experienced when

asked to recall transitional moments in their romantic relationships. Future research in this area is

imperative in order to better understand participants' perceptions of their romantic relationships.

Limitations

In light of these findings and their potential implications, it is important to discuss

possible limitations of this study. First, all of the participants self-identified as having a formal

diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome or autism, but such a diagnosis was not confirmed by this

study. In the future, efforts should be made to confirm participants' diagnostic status. Second, the

participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Subsequently, four of the participants

knew each other through a residential university certificate program for people with

developmental disabilities. Such an association may impact the generalizability of these four

participants' romantic experiences to other young adults with autism. Third, participation in the

study required that participants be willing to discuss their romantic experiences with an

interviewer. Willingness to share such private experiences may have impacted the type of

participant who ultimately took part in the study. The generalizability of these results to a wider population is unknown.

Conclusion

This study provides groundwork for understanding the nature of romantic experiences of young adults with autism. Seven in-depth interviews were conducted to gain preliminary insight into the methods by which young adults with autism navigate and perceive their dating and romantic relationship experiences. To our knowledge, this is the first study that has examined the romantic experiences of young adults with autism from the perspective of the young adult. Based on the findings in this study, it is clear that young adults with autism are posed unique challenges, but also have achieved clear, demonstrable successes in the areas of initiating and maintaining romantic relationships. These findings provide a starting point for pursuit of future research in the area of romantic relationships for young adults with autism.

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