

Exploring the clinical need for transgender and gender diverse autistic individuals regarding their social communication and related wellbeing.

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Meet The Research Team



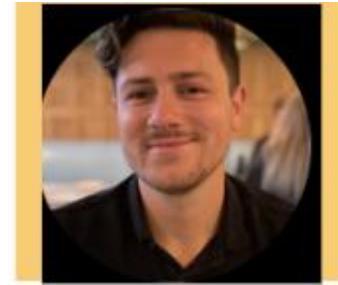
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About Me

- Third-year DClinPsy student.
- Autistic (diagnosed June 2025)
- Interests: Scooby Doo, Classic rock and crocheting.
- Additional personal characteristics
 - Cis woman, heterosexual, white, long-term health condition, working-class upbringing.



Research Progress

- Ethical approval in January 2025
- Recruitment and advertisement
- Completed all our interviews
- At the tail end of the analysis process

Wellness Note

- Things can feel tough right now.
- Although not intended, some may find the topics in this project to be upsetting or triggering
- Do what you need to look after yourself during this talk

Introduction to the research

- More transgender and gender diverse people show signs of autism compared to the cisgender population
- A key experience for autistic people is differences in social communication
- Differences in social communication is known to have a significant impact on individuals' emotional wellbeing
- However, there is currently little research into how this interacts with the experiences of transgender individuals.

Our research questions

- 1) What do social communication needs look like for transgender and gender diverse autistic individuals and communities?
- 2) What are the experiences for these individuals and communities when considering socialising and psychological distress?
- 3) What more can be done to support these communities in mental health and general support services?

Methods: Participants

- Total of 10 participants
- Age: 27-54 years old
- 1 transwoman; 3 transmen, 6 non-binary
- 8 with formal autism diagnosis, 2 with self diagnosis
- 6 white British, 1 White Irish, 1 White Eastern European, 2 multiple ethnicity groups: white European and south Asian & white European and black (unspecified)
- 8 higher education, 1 no formal education, 1 prefer not to say

Methods: Interviews

Ranged between 45 and 90 minutes

All took place over zoom

4 sections, which looked at:

- 1) Describing abilities to communicate in social situations
- 2) How they experience social communication
- 3) How their experiences of social communication impacts their life
- 4) Experience of accessing support from services

Analysis

We used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Convergence and divergence (similarities and differences)

Commonality and individuality

Themes Overview

- **Group theme 1:** Multiple marginalised identities mean multiple challenges
- **Group theme 2:** Social spaces can be unwelcoming
- **Group theme 3:** Adapting communication to meet normative standards
- **Group theme 4:** Adapting communication negatively affects wellbeing
- **Group theme 5:** Communication & socialising is fun when you find your communities
- **Group theme 6:** Services have the potential to help or harm

Group theme 1: Multiple marginalised identities mean multiple challenges

Summary:

6 participants reported facing multiple challenges, as society marginalises multiple aspects of their identities.

Key Quotes:

"If you tick a lot of boxes... all of it kind of waters down and blends, doesn't matter that you're foreign, or you're autistic, or chronically ill, or queer, or any of those things, non-binary, whatever. Like, it just kind of blends into this an archetype. Because, I guess, for some people, it's too much, they don't know ."

" I'd never heard of non-binary until about 10 years ago. And then I read about it and thought, Yeah, that fits"

Group theme 2: Social spaces can be unwelcoming

Subthemes:

- 1) Society prescribes gendered standards for communication
- 2) Social consequences for breaching gender norms
- 3) Society others those with non-gendered communication styles
- 4) communication misunderstandings between society and trans autistic people
- 5) Society discriminates against trans autistic people's identities
- 6) Not feeling safe to express their authentic identities

Social spaces can be unwelcoming

Subtheme 1: Society prescribes gendered standards for communication

Summary:

9 participants spoke about how, from a young age, society expects you to socialise and communicate based on your SAAB.

Key quotes:

“I've taken a long time to develop a male voice that's usable for a lot of situations...I lead the conversation... established authority... I've spent 30 years developing this”

“ I cannot at all adapt to like being a kind of typical straight man, bloke language...I feel a lot more socially awkward in their presence. Straight male bloke is like a million miles away from what I am, and like that would be the absolute opposite”

Social spaces can be unwelcoming

Subtheme 2: Social consequences for breaching gender norms

Summary:

3 participants reported on the double standards for meeting societies communication rules.

Key quotes:

“[cis men] says things on their mind without really thinking, and doesn’t suffer any consequences... I also say things without thinking, but I pay for them.”

“Since I transitioned from like basically being like perceived as like a brown woman to a brown man... I felt like people often perceived me as being more like aggressive or like maybe, too, like blunt or direct...I knew that was partially related to autism, but also partially related to how I was seen as a brown person. But I know I’m it’s extra now that I’m like a brown guy.”

Social spaces can be unwelcoming

Subtheme 3: Society others those with non-gendered communication styles

Summary:

9 participants report feeling othered by society.

Key Quotes:

“From being very little I have been very gender mushy...So **that's impacted kind of integrating in school** and stuff because it's like social groups are quite gendered. So it feels like it's impacted my ability to kind of learn how to socialise effectively”

“There's topics things that people talk about, this certain closeness in terms of like physical touch personal space.... **It feels very gendered in something I will never understand”**

Social spaces can be unwelcoming

Subtheme 4: communication misunderstandings between society and trans autistic people

Summary:

6 participants said there are many levels of communication misunderstandings as they experience multiple marginalised identities within cis western neurotypical society

Key Quote:

“There’s two people involved in communication, and you both got an equal part. But when it’s always blamed on the autistic person, they’re internalizing that constantly, When you’ve internally fed a narrative that you’re broke, and you’re disordered. The miscommunication is the autistic person’s fault. The autistic person needs to communicate in this neurotypical way all of that stress is going on the autistic person.”

Social spaces can be unwelcoming

Subtheme 5: Society discriminates against trans autistic people's identities

Summary:

9 Participants report having faced discrimination.

Key quotes:

“If I walk into a room and I'm assuming most people are neurotypical it makes me uncomfortable. There's no like spaces that are like specifically for queer trans people of color who are also neurodivergent. Yeah, I do think it's definitely the worst when I'm like, in spaces that I assume are like mostly white and cis because those are like more visible parts of my identity...So that's always a bit of a stress factor when interacting with people.”

“Because I've gone home, and I've rethought that whole scenario I'm like, Oh, I'm ready for this. If someone else approaches me, I'm not gonna be cut off that I'm going to know what to say. Yeah...so kind of try to take control of the conversation... I don't really have a nice experience talking to people, so you cannot make this any worse for me if I can be in position to steer it a different way.”

Social spaces can be unwelcoming

Subtheme 6: Not feeling safe to express their authentic identities

Summary:

Trans autistic people feel they need to mask multiple aspects of their identity for personal and social safety.

Key quotes:

“It's made me want to disclose being trans more, I think. But it also makes me more scared of being, of disclosing being trans. Yeah, it's one of those things where I think I should do it more because I think people should know and people should be more normal about trans people. But also, it makes it scarier, too, because I'm aware of like the backlash.”

“I have considered presenting in a more gender diverse way but feel that the social stigma and process isn't worth it for me. None of this is especially a secret, so I wouldn't necessarily say I'm closeted but I also don't really share it widely as I see no need.”

Group theme 3: Adapting communication to meet normative standards

Subthemes:

- 1) Adapting communication style means acceptance and safety
- 2) Although able, adapting is effortful
- 3) There are barriers to adapting communication
- 4) Factors which enable communication adaptions

Adapting communication to meet normative standards

Subtheme 1: Adapting communication style means acceptance and safety

Summary:

Participants reported being able to adapt their communication to fit the standards of society. For some, adapting meant acceptance and for others it meant safety

Key quotes:

“I can talk to neurotypicals. I am quite an able communicator... Go into work... speak to hospital exec as an equal... porters as an equal... is very important, allows me to go in and get a picture of an organization allows me to do my job, it's fun.”

“I'm always self-monitoring to make sure I'm not interrupting too much, to make sure I'm asking questions back and to make sure I'm not like getting too animated. There's a lot of like self-monitoring.. it's constantly like keeping an eye on everything I'm doing.”

Adapting communication to meet normative standards

Subtheme 2: Although able, adapting is effortful

Summary:

6 participants emphasised how effortful it is for them to adapt their natural communication to fit in with societies communication standards

Key quotes:

“But I really have to think about it. I'm doing my body language consciously, I'm doing tone of voice consciously, and particularly when people are responding to me. All of that nuance processing is conscious.”

“When I did voice training, and I was like intentionally pitching down all of the time like I would lose track of that. That was the second I got on the tangent and just needed to tell everyone, and then I'd be like, Oh, no, wait! Let me climb down an octave. So it's more like, I don't think I do a lot of voice training, which is why I haven't looked into it, and that's probably linked to the whole autism thing. I already feel like I'm juggling when I'm holding a conversation. I don't want to add another ball into that.”

Adapting communication to meet normative standards

Subtheme 3: There are barriers to adapting communication

Summary:

All participants identified that there are barriers to them being able to communicate within society

Key Quotes:

“It's just an ongoing problem that I think I think people perceive me as... a lot more capable than I am, and I think it annoys them, and that's not like I access anything. Even though I really need the help, and I just think it's, like, I'm still... I wish I could say this is in the past. No, I'm still dealing with it now as much as ever, honestly. Yeah.”

Adapting communication to meet normative standards

Subtheme 4: Factors which enable communication adaptions

Summary:

7 participants recognised there are factors which facilitate their ability to communicate with society

Key quotes:

“Semi speaking experience... It's situational... **depends quite often on how kind other people are.**”

“I always wear my Progressive Pride flag necklace, but... **Some people worry that that could make me a target.** And I am officially a vulnerable adult”

Group theme 4: Adapting communication negatively affects wellbeing

Subthemes:

- 1)** There is an emotional impact
- 2)** There is a functional impact

Adapting communication negatively affects wellbeing

Subtheme 1: There is an emotional impact

Summary:

All 10 participants had reported experiencing difference from societies communication standards had an impact on their emotional wellbeing.

Key Quotes:

“You know what we when people start telling you, or you know, **saying negative things to you** or talking down to you. It probably is. You probably might not think it’s a big thing. But it it is. **It adds up over time. Trauma, kind of thing.”**

“I would rather cut my little finger off then have a meltdown and for me, once I’ve had a meltdown I will go straight into a shutdown. But most of the time now we have a shutdown if I do feel overwhelmed, and it’s always because of something outside of my control.”

Adapting communication negatively affects wellbeing

Subtheme 2: There is a functional impact

Summary:

7 participants stated that difficulties with communication impacted them functionally. i.e. physical wellbeing, energy levels, social abilities.

Key quotes:

“I find it quite draining... . If people go off script, I then find it like more difficult. But yeah, I guess interacting with colleagues would be the most straining part, just because there’s no like set things that you say in that situation, at least to me.”

“It’s quite draining for me . I have to do a lot of cognitive labor, a lot of self-monitoring as well, and things like that, so it can get really draining. I can get quite distracted as well. And especially if it’s, like, group situations.”

Group theme 5: Communication and socialising is fun when you find your communities

Subthemes:

- 1)** Communities provide a shared experience
- 2)** Communities remove social pressure to adapt communication styles
- 3)** Social spaces must be safe to be accessible and inclusive

Communication and socialising is fun when you find your communities

Subtheme 1: Communities provide a shared experience

Summary:

8 participants have identified that finding spaces and communities with people who have a shared experience is vital for social wellbeing

Key quotes:

“Yeah. Well, my best friend is a gay man, and then I've got a few, a few trans friends as well. Yeah..., it's my best friend **we met at an autistic conference, and we're both musicians. So, we had a lot in common.**”

“[attending a queer social space] I hadn't really befriended anyone yet. yeah, **it was a queer group, so I didn't think I was at risk of like any overt transphobia. But I was still like, really anxious about like what's the bathroom situation like...I was even more on edge...and it's not like God if I'd clocked someone else trans, I'd have been like, hey, new friend, but it would have just been like, oh, yes, I have possibly more in common with someone here.”**

Communication and socialising is fun when you find your communities

Subtheme 2: Communities remove social pressure to adapt communication styles

Summary:

6 participants spoke about finding communication within their communities to be easier because there's no pressure or expectation for them to change the way they communicate.

Key quotes:

"We [autistic people] can just communicate naturally rather than all of these weird aliens out there in the rest of the world who don't think like me. I have no, I do not understand what they want out of life. And they go into loud spaces voluntarily. Why, so what it's done is put me into an autistic Ghetto."

"Go into an autistic function and everybody knows that they're autistic, then I am not going to have any problem. And I will say any problem, because nobody's going to judge me on that directness. You know that rudeness, you know. I don't have to put all this airy fairy stuff on."

Communication and socialising is fun when you find your communities

Subtheme 3: Social spaces must be safe to be accessible and inclusive

Summary:

7 participant stated they must feel safe, accepted and respected in order to enter, stay in and enjoy social spaces.

Key quotes:

“I think finding out that I was autistic, actually **gave me a community** to then meet other autistic people where, you know, like **being gender divergent is a huge part of the autistic experience.**”

“**I have a complicated relationship with talking about being autistic or talking about being trans.** I know that people tend to be more transphobic if they think they don't know any trans people around. So I feel more of like and I should disclose thing, and I don't really tend to most of the time but my job also, and put in like different places quite often. **So I'll tell people if I've like known them for a while, if I know that they're like very chill with**”

Group theme 6: Services have the potential to help or harm

Subthemes:

- 1) Services cause harm**
- 2) There are barriers to accessing services**
- 3) There are ways to increase access to services**

Services have the potential to help or harm

Subtheme 1: Service cause harm

Summary:

7 participants report being subject to harmful practices at the hands of services and professionals

Key quotes:

“You know things for an emergency, because I've had things go really, really badly wrong in healthcare where I've nearly been killed twice because of people not facilitating my environment, my reasonable adjustments and enabling me to speak so that has then led to healthcare procedures being done to me. But if they'd have actually read my healthcare passport would have explained all of this”

“ I was trying to get a free assessment for autism back then. I think that was just kind of a difficult experience, bureaucratic, wise, and because it had the added layer of dealing with a bunch of people who are calling me by my old name. It put me off chasing up further, I suppose.”

Services have the potential to help or harm

Subtheme 2: There are barriers to accessing services

Summary:

4 participants spoke of additional barriers to accessing support from services

Key quotes:

"I got a letter you're on the waiting list. 'We're going to remove you unless you respond to this letter within 2 weeks', or whatever it was. And I just I got so annoyed... I'm struggling to keep it together and do everything that I need to do as it is, you've given me another chore, which, if I was feeling like fine like, surely posting a letter and signing the form, wouldn't be that difficult, but it just it makes it difficult."

"Well, I wouldn't say you in terms of trans stuff. There is much support. It's more of a I didn't tell them I was autistic because I didn't want that to be a barrier to transition. And yeah, I have no regrets about that. I've told. I've recommended to other people that they do the same, if you can mask enough to get through the appointments, please do So yeah, I wouldn't I ?"

Services have the potential to help or harm

Subtheme 3: There are ways to increase access to services

Summary:

6 participants have suggestions for improving access to services and support.

Key quotes:

“I don't feel like a woman, I don't feel like calling myself a woman. I feel like I'm adjacent to that, I guess. **And... It's nice, it's very nice when you see a box where you can tick, non-binary”**

“I've learned there are some spaces that I can't access, and there is no point. Keep going retraumatizing myself. So when everybody talks about inclusion. **I don't want to be included. Thank you. I want to be safe. Don't push me into inclusion because I want to be able to communicate, and I want to be able to be me.”**

Discussion points: Summary

RQ 1:

Trans autistic adults face additional challenges not experienced by cisgender populations, due to their multiple marginalised identities.

RQ 2:

Such challenges negatively impact their wellbeing.
However, community connects have a positive impact on their wellbeing.

RQ 3:

Services need to do better.
Support is accessible when it is personalised, neuro-affirming and gender-affirming

Discussion points: Strengths and Limitations

Strengths:

- Credibility
- Research advisor support
- Rapport building

-Limitations

- Non-response bias

Next steps

1. Work with a research advisor to review the themes
2. Write up
3. Research advisor to review the write up
4. Submit to the DClinPsy
5. Submit to a publication