The Power of the Voice of Women with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Their life experiences in their transition out of college.

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Introduction & Background

The past decade has seen a rise in the number of students with ASD arriving in higher education. In more recent times, we have seen an increase in the number of studies exploring the challenges facing students with ASD as they navigate the university environment (Quinn, Gleeson & Nolan, 2014; Anderson et al., 2017; Gelbar, Smith & Reicho, 2014; Glennon, 2001).

Methodology

In order to truly explore the life experiences of the women, a research methodology that would centralize the women’s voices, give essence to their life, and allow for multiplicity of meaning and experiences was essential and as a result a qualitative method was employed.

Philosophical Framework: The Feminist Approach

A feminist approach was chosen as the guiding philosophical framework. The approach influences all stages of the research, from the topic, to the design, the process and the outcomes. The study focuses on the needs of women and their realities and is specifically designed for women, rather than just being about them (Peters, Jackson & Rudge, 2007). The women in the research are considered ‘experts’ in their own lives and are empowered within the research process (Ollieville & Tremblay, 2000). The aim is to help create a sense of empowerment for these women with ASD who have been marginalized within society, where the dominant discourse focuses on men with ASD (Kirkovski et al., 2013). It creates a platform from which their voices can be heard, and moves beyond ‘knowledge for its own sake’ but using the knowledge for change and power (Patton, 2002, p. 129).

Research Design

The Narrative Inquiry approach was chosen as the research method to best answer the guiding research questions and allows the voices, the stories and the deep experiences of the women to be heard.

Narrrative Inquiry provides an approach for understanding human experience that is consistent with the ways in which individuals make sense of their shared lived experience (Gergen, 1994, 1999).

The Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) developed by Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf (2000) was chosen as a method as it offers a method for both data generation and collection using the specific BNIM interview technique, and also offers an analytical technique for analysis of the narratives (Wengraf, 2006). The study utilized three interviews to seek the experiences of the women and the format is detailed below:

Figure 2: Research Design using the BNIM approach.

Sampling

A purposive sample of 20 women was selected for this study. Inclusion criteria were:

- Women over 18 years of age
- Women who have identified as living with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder or Asperger’s Syndrome
- Women who have completed a university education degree within the past 30 years
- Resident in Republic Of Ireland

Results

The study is currently ongoing, some of the initial themes that are emerging are identified below.

Themes emerging

Difficult Transitions
Finding a job—aemployment
Floating at sea—waiting for something to happen
Life is everywhere—no pattern
Struggle with life situations—anxious with new things

Mental Health issues
- emerging
Drank a lot
Admitted to hospital

Managing Social relationships and communication
- Like an alien
Never made friends
Want to find my husband
Fired by my boss
Miscommunication

Busy world
- Sensory difficulties
Tonnes of voices

Questioning everything...
- What was I studying?
- What was I doing in work?
- Need to change things
- Why I needed to get good grades?
- Expectations...

When all the data is collected each participants story will be co-constructed into their own story and further thematic analysis of the women’s experiences will be generated.

The initial findings highlight the diverse and distinctive challenges faced by women with ASD; including mental health difficulties, unmet support needs in education settings and the workplace, and challenges with managing social interactions and relationships. Their life stories are uniquely and highlight the need for all health professionals to work in a client centered way to best support the needs of these women.

Conclusion

Given that women with ASD are a burgeoning population, we must consider that we need to address their needs and listen to voices.


Beattie, L., W., & Gettel, L. (2014). In their own words: The career planning experiences of college students with ASD. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 40(4) 199-205.


