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Exploring the Experiences of Autistic Graduate Women in Navigating the World of Work

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Declaration

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Summary

International research highlights poor prospects for autistic individuals in gaining and maintaining work (Baldwin et al., 2014; Harvery et al., 2021; Hendricks, 2010; Maslahati et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2019). Participation and graduation from higher education is said to increase the likelihood that autistic individuals will gain employment and experience higher paid salaries for their work (Migliore et al., 2012, Ohl et al., 2017; Rast et al., 2020). However, literature indicates that autistic graduates continue to remain less likely to be employed compared to graduates with other disabilities (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, 2019) and far below the rates for the population in general. While there is some literature examining the trajectories of autistic adults, autistic women are under-represented within this (Leedham et al., 2020; Taylor & DaWalt, 2020). Research specific to the area of work and autism is either dominated by men (Baldwin et al., 2014; Griffith et al., 2012; Hayward et al., 2019) or the findings are not disaggregated by gender (Taylor & DaWalt, 2020). There is a lack of studies specifically relating to autistic women at work (Gemma, 2021; Hayward et al., 2018b) and even more so for autistic women who have successfully graduated from higher education. This study aims to bridge this gap by providing an in-depth understanding of the experiences and journeys of autistic graduate women in navigating the world of work.

A narrative inquiry methodology was chosen to centralise the voices of the women (Polkinghorne, 1988). The research methods were informed by a reference group which comprised of autistic women. Purposive and snowball sampling was utilised to recruit a sample of twelve autistic women (26 to 53 years) who had attended higher education in the past ten years. Multiple interviews were completed using an in-depth interviewing method guided by concepts of the Biographic-Narrative-Interpretive-Method (Wengraf, 2001). An object selected by the women was also used to support the women in the telling of their story. The analysis utilised Polkinghorne's (1995) orientation to narrative inquiry, where an analysis of narratives was completed guided by Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The findings highlight that the working lives of these women were varied, multifaceted and often fragmented, with experiences of unemployment, underemployment, and instability. Influencing factors on their work experience included their perceptions of difference, double empathy problems as they navigated the social demands of work, challenges within the sensory environment and managing disclosure. The women were actively engaged in employing a variety of strategies to counteract their feelings of difference, in order to 'fit in' and as a survival skill to navigate a neurotypical working world. This came at a cost to the women and evident across most of their narratives was their experience of autistic burnout.

While the women did experience barriers, the study findings also identified factors that enabled success. These included a good job-fit, supportive employment programmes, disclosure, access to reasonable accommodations as well as support from family and colleagues. The women identified suggestions and advice for employers to incorporate into work structures and practices to support and enable autistic women to thrive at work and to change the narrative from disabling to enabling. The women identified that the narrative inquiry approach facilitated their voices to be heard, placing them at the forefront of the study, and this was important to them.

This study provided an important insight into the experiences and work journeys of autistic graduate women from an Irish context broadening our understanding of how contextual factors within the working world can shape and influence the women's working lives. The findings identify a need to hear directly from autistic women regarding both their strengths and how the work environment could support successful work experiences. It highlighted the necessity of shifting societal and employer attitudes towards understanding and appreciating diversity within the workplace and to employ neurodiversity perspectives within the world of work. There is a need to foreground the voices of autistic women given that they have experience-based expertise, which is crucial in understanding autism from a women's perspective (Milton & Bracher, 2013).

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Dissemination

Oral Presentations:

- Gleeson, C.I., Nolan, C., Spirtos, M., & McKay, E. (2022). Autistic women's narratives of the world of work and employment. 3-Minute Thesis Presentation. World Federation of Occupational Therapists Congress, 28th-31st August, Paris Convention Centre, Paris, France.
- Gleeson, C.I., Nolan, C., Spirtos, M., & McKay, E. (2020). Navigating the World of Work: Autistic Women's Experiences. Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland Annual Conference, 9th October 2020 (Virtual).
- Gleeson, C.I., Nolan, C., & McKay, E. (2019). A Creative Approach to Narrative Research in Storying the Lives of Women with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). 5th International Irish Narrative Inquiry Conference, 2nd- 3rd May 2019, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Republic of Ireland.
- Gleeson, C.I., Nolan, C., & McKay, E. (2018). Narrative Inquiry to explore the life experiences of women with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in their transition out of college. Royal College of Occupational Therapists Annual Conference, 11th-13th June 2018, Belfast's Waterfront Hall, Belfast, United Kingdom.

Poster Presentations:

- Gleeson, C.I., Nolan, C., & McKay, E. (2018). The Voice of Women with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Their life experiences in their transition out of college. World Federation of Occupational Therapists International Congress, 21st-25th May 2018, Cape Town International Convention Centre, Cape Town, South Africa.

Invited Speaker:

- Saint John of God Research Foundation Learning Exchange Series In partnership with the Autism Special Interest Group of the Psychological Society of Ireland, Webinar Series: Autistic Women and Girls: Neurodiversity in the workplace. Wednesday 10th February 2021.
- The Autism Spectrum Association of Ireland Annual Conference; titled: Adulthood: Preparing for The Next Step. Dublin, November 2017.

Other Related Work:

- **Website Article:** Gleeson, C. (2020). Transitioning into the world again after lockdown, Autistica website. <https://www.autistica.org.uk/what-is-autism/what-is-autism/navigating-the-transition-into-the-world-with-covid-19>
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- Virtual workshop titled: 'How to increase your success in getting published in medical education' on Friday 4th December 2020 by Dr Kevin Eva. Ph.D., Hon. FAcadMed.
- Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method; Three-Day Training Case-Interpretation Intensive in Dublin, Ireland in March 2020.
- Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method Two Day Intensive Interviewing Training in Muswell Hill London in November 2019.
- School of Nursing, Trinity College Dublin, Annual Research School in March 2019.
- Completed an Associate Postgraduate Certificate in Narrative Research from the University of East London in January 2019.

Positions held:

- Board Member and Director of Asperger Syndrome Association of Ireland (ASPIRE) in 2017.
- Advisor to Pieta House Autism Research Group.

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1 Chapter One - Introduction

1.1 Introducing the Researcher and the Research

The impetus for conducting this research study has its origins in my personal and professional experience of working with the autistic community. My interest in autism dates back to my late teenage and early adult years, when I worked as a Speech and Drama Teacher, where I met young autistic boys and girls who enjoyed participating in all aspects of the imaginary and dramatic world. These experiences led me to study Occupational Therapy at university. When I qualified in 2008, I began working within a university-based occupational therapy service supporting students with disabilities in their participation within the higher education environment, both academically and socially. During this time, I had the opportunity to work with autistic men and women, who were entering the university in greater numbers. Whilst working with these students, I undertook a Masters by Research and an Advanced Certificate in Education with a focus on autism. This strengthened my interest in autism and broadened my participation with the university autistic community and the wider autistic community. I held committee positions with ASPIRE; The Autism Spectrum Association of Ireland and with Pieta House, as well as being involved in information-based projects with the Irish organisation; ASIAm and Autistica, a United Kingdom based organisation.

In working collaboratively with the university autistic community, we developed several student-led initiatives for each stage of the higher education student journey. This included the development of a website, a transition to university summer programme for secondary school students (Doyle, Gleeson & Treanor, 2017), a weekly leisure group (Gleeson, 2012) and a peer-led student ambassador programme (Gleeson & Treanor, 2017). I was also involved in the development of a transition to employment service for disabled graduates and students which highlighted that the transition to the world of work remained elusive and difficult to navigate (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017). It became apparent from my involvement within the autistic community, that more and more women were identifying as autistic,

but were late diagnosed (Bargiela et al., 2016; Begeer et al., 2013; Lockwood Estrin et al., 2021), often diagnosed at university. The world of work was an area of discussion, from which women reported concerns and challenges in making their transition from university to work and in navigating work systems. On reflection, and through spending time with graduate women, I realised that this was an area that warranted further exploration.

Participation and graduation from higher education increases the likelihood that autistic individuals will gain employment and experience higher paid salaries for their work (Migliore et al., 2012, Ohl et al., 2017; Rast et al., 2020). Despite this however, autistic individuals who successfully graduate from university continue to remain less likely to be employed compared to graduates with other disabilities (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, 2019) and are disproportionately unemployed and underemployed compared with the general population (Bernick & Holden, 2015). Little is known about the employment and career paths for autistic individuals who have completed higher education (Raymaker et al., 2023; Vincent & Ralston, 2023). Most of the literature to date has focused predominantly on children (Wehman et al., 2014) and on emerging adulthood and transition age youth who have not completed further training (Anderson et al., 2021). While there has been a growing body of literature examining the trajectories of autistic adults, autistic women are under-represented within this (Leedham et al., 2020; Taylor & DaWalt, 2020). Little is known about the experience of being an autistic woman (Bargiela et al., 2016) and even less so about autistic women's experiences of work (Cook & Garnett, 2018; Hayward et al., 2018b; Leedham et al., 2020; Nagib & Wilton, 2020; Taylor & DaWalt, 2020). With little known about their work experiences and journeys post university, this study aims to bridge this gap and provide a greater understanding of navigating work from the perspective of some graduate autistic women, which has the potential to inform future education, work practices and policy development.

At the outset of this thesis, I wish to situate myself, and my position within the neurodiversity perspective and framework. Like the far-reaching concept of diversity, the neurodiversity perspective as applied within the autism field, accepts non-autistic activists

as allies (Kapp, 2020). As a non-autistic researcher and ally, I firmly stand with a neurodiversity lens through which I view autism simply as a difference, valuing the full spectrum of difference and the uniqueness of each individual, whereby diversity exists across human neurobiology (Kapp et al., 2013; Walker, 2014). From this stance, I acknowledge the rights and inclusion of all individuals within society. Conducting this research within a theoretical neurodiversity framework has clear and important implications for how this research was undertaken and documented in the thesis format. As the researcher, I applied several practices derived from the neurodiversity framework in guiding the research study and these are discussed throughout the chapters in the thesis.

In line with the neurodiversity viewpoint, ‘identity first’ language (Halmari, 2011) is used throughout the thesis chapters, rather than ‘person first’ language (Blaska, 1993). The exception to this is when I am referring directly to specific terminology and wording used in the worldwide diagnostic frameworks and when quoting another author or the findings from another author. The use of identity first language reflects the preference within the autistic community (Kenny et al., 2016) and with autistic advocates, respecting their wish to be humanised and not medicalised (Botha et al., 2023; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Bury et al., 2020; Kapp et al., 2013; Sinclair, 1993; 1999). I also recognise, however, that individuals themselves have differing opinions and perspectives on the use of language and terminology of autism and therefore, within this research study I asked each of the women who participated in this study how they wished to refer to themselves and autism during my engagement with them.

In this chapter, a background and rationale for the study is presented. As this study was conducted within the Republic of Ireland, an overview of the local context is provided. The research question is presented, together with a short introduction to the methodology and methods chosen to address the research question. The chapter concludes with an overview of the thesis structure, chapter by chapter.

1.2 Background and Rationale

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) also known as 'autism', is a neurodevelopmental disability that is characterised by differences in social communication and interaction, focused interests, and sensitivity to sensory stimulation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). As a result, the different socio-cognitive processing styles can pose both advantages and disadvantages within current societal norms (Fletcher-Watson & Happe, 2019). The concept of autism was characterised in the medical and scientific literature and was first established as a diagnostic construct in the mid-1940s (Asperger, 1944; Kanner, 1943) in the nosology of International Classification of Diseases (World Health Organisation, 2019) and in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and was primarily known as a childhood condition. It was not until the 1980s that systematic research into adult identification took place and significant changes were made to the diagnostic categories (Evans, 2017; Verhoeff, 2013). With the broadening of the diagnostic category into the 1990s and 2000s, awareness of autism in previously undiagnosed adults rapidly increased (Happe & Frith, 2020) with more adults being diagnosed. Autism is now recognised to be a heterogeneous, neurodevelopmental difference that continues across the lifespan (Brugha et al., 2011; Loth et al., 2021; Whitely et al., 2019). Across the world, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of individuals identifying and being diagnosed as autistic, with prevalence estimates increasing from around 0.04 percent in the 1970s to one-to-two percent currently (Fuentes et al., 2021).

With an increase in prevalence rates year-on-year (Roux et al., 2023; Zeiden et al., 2022) the autistic community continues to grow worldwide. Within the United States, an estimated 1.5 million autistic individuals are due to reach adulthood in the next decade (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Against this backdrop, it is evident that more and more autistic individuals will be entering the workplace into the future (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020). Entering employment is an aim for most individuals, as they enter adulthood (Blatterer, 2007; Buckley et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2017), and is seen as a socially 'normative' activity that occupies adulthood (Fussel & Furstenberg, 2005). Yet, in stark contrast to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which

positions equal access and participation in employment as a human right for all (United Nations General Assembly, 2007), autistic individuals worldwide are said to be chronically unemployed and underemployed (Burgess & Cimera, 2014; Farley et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2019). Historically, employment has not been easily achieved or maintained for autistic individuals (Griffith et al., 2012; Hayward et al., 2018b; Hendricks, 2010; Remington et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2015). Despite significant common misconceptions, autistic individuals possess notable strengths and abilities that can be harnessed within the workplace (Baldwin et al., 2014; Cope & Remington, 2022; deSchipper et al., 2016; Griffith et al., 2012). The contribution that autistic people make within the workplace has been increasingly recognised (Remington et al., 2022; Russell et al., 2019) with more organisations adopting autism employment initiatives (Hayward et al., 2019; Remington & Pellicano, 2019) and recognising the value of neurodiversity in the workplace (Cope & Remington, 2022).

Notwithstanding the increased recognition of the contribution autistic individuals can make in work (Krzeminska et al., 2019), and the significant level of strengths and skills that an autistic individual can bring to the workplace (Bury et al., 2020; Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014), there is a relatively robust evidence-base that depicts a very negative and bleak picture of work for autistic adults within the literature to date (Cederlund et al., 2008; Cooper & Kennady, 2021; Djela, 2021; Hendricks, 2010; Nicholas et al., 2015). Worldwide, autistic individuals consistently experience poor employment prospects (Billstedt et al., 2005; Buescher et al., 2014; Holwerda et al., 2013). European data estimates that the employment rate of autistic individuals is approximately ten percent across Europe (Autism Europe, 2019) and this rate is much lower compared to trends worldwide.

In the United States, fifty-eight percent of young autistic adults, aged from eighteen to twenty-five are employed, with only twenty-one percent of those in full-time employment (Roux et al., 2015). In Canada, Nicholas et al. (2019) reported an employment rate of 14.3 percent for those aged between eighteen and sixty-four years of age. While, an Australian study, highlighted that 55 percent of autistic adults (Autism Spectrum Australia, 2013) were

employed. A study in the United Kingdom found that only 32 percent of 2,000 autistic adults were employed, in either full-time or part-time work, compared to 47 percent of adults with disabilities generally, and 80 percent of adults without disabilities (National Autistic Society, 2016). Of note, is the fact that the employment rate of autistic adults generally is significantly lower than rates for adults with other disabilities, including mental health difficulties (Roux et al., 2013; Shattuck et al., 2012). Of those that are in employment, many autistic individuals work in positions inconsistent with or below their qualification or the skill level required for the role (Baldwin et al., 2014). Furthermore, many may work reduced hours and receive lower rates of pay or tend to work in precarious and/or short-term jobs (Roux et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2012). This has been termed underemployment and the literature suggests that 45 percent of autistic adults are considered underemployed (Baldwin et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2015; Ohl et al., 2017).

At a personal level, the consequences of these poor work outcomes have the potential to negatively impact on a person's physical and mental health, their quality of life and their socioeconomic status (Fleming et al., 2013; Hedley et al., 2018; Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020; Remington & Pellicano, 2019). Meaningful work is associated with independence, greater quality of life, social connections, a sense of purpose, enhanced self-esteem, and community engagement (Anderson et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2015; Chiang et al., 2013; Faragher et al., 2005). Therefore, unemployment can place autistic individuals at a greater risk of mental health difficulties (Ohl et al., 2017). Unemployment also impacts at a societal level, due to lost productivity and an increased need for government funding (Krieger et al., 2012).

Although specific research on employment and autism is scarce (Remington & Pellicano, 2019), it is identified that the world of work is a complex environment to navigate, and autistic individuals can face and experience multiple barriers and challenges in obtaining and maintaining employment (Chen et al., 2015; Muller et al., 2003). Negotiating the employment processes such as job applications and interviews can present challenges (Scott et al., 2015; Strickland et al., 2013). Furthermore, autistic employees also experience

obstacles to sustaining employment and maximising their potential within the workplace due to social demands, negotiating the physical and sensory environment and managing occupational stress (Harmuth et al., 2018; Hayward et al., 2018b; Muller et al., 2003; Nagib & Wilton, 2020). Workplace discrimination and attitudes, as well as perceived stigma, also contribute to the disparity between the employment potential of autistic individuals and the reality of the employment outcomes published within the literature (Romualdez et al., 2021a; Sarret, 2017).

While the limited literature available on work and employment has identified the work experiences of autistic individuals, only a small percentage of autistic women feature in this research (Hayward et al., 2018b). Little attention has been given to the role of gender in shaping work experiences for this population (Hayward et al., 2018b). Autistic women do tend to lag behind men in relation to work outcomes, with women experiencing higher levels of underemployment (Hayward et al., 2018b) and experiencing lower levels of consistent employment over time compared to autistic men (Taylor et al., 2015). A recent systematic review which explored the literature on the challenges for autistic women within the workplace (Hayward et al., 2018b) concluded that no study was identified for inclusion, that systematically investigated the challenges and barriers specifically for autistic women at work. This review did identify, however, the urgent need for research to be designed and conducted exploring the labour market participation experiences of autistic women. Women have all but been absent from autism research literature (Leedham et al., 2020). Given that autism is more commonly diagnosed in males to females across all age groups (Fombonne, 2009; Russell et al., 2011), research has focused on boys and men, and this is problematic as knowledge and conceptualisations of autism are largely derived from male samples (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Kreiser & White, 2014; Mandy et al., 2012). This in turn has created a biased understanding of autism, where the dominant discourse has focused on boys and men (Clarke et al., 2021; Kirkovski et al., 2013; Milner et al., 2019; Saxe, 2017). As a result, autistic women remained undiagnosed for decades without support (Brugha et al., 2016). Although little is known about the experiences of autistic women (Gemma, 2021; Mosely et al., 2021; Pellicano et al., 2014; Taylor & DaWalt, 2020; Watkins et al., 2014), this evidence suggests that their experiences

do differ from men in various aspects of the autism experience (Gould, 2017; Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015).

Davidson (2008) indicated that autistic women have unique stories to tell and Shefcyk (2015) contends that significant efforts must be made to include them in research. There is a small, but growing, body of qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of autistic women, which have briefly mentioned the concept of work and employment (Baldwin & Costley, 2016; Kelly et al., 2022; Leedham et al., 2020; Webster & Garvis, 2017). However, no study has qualitatively explored the experiences of autistic women in navigating work, and in particular autistic women who have participated in higher education (Raymaker et al., 2023), despite the significant calls for this (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2017; Nicholas et al., 2019; Roche et al., 2021). Autistic individuals are the experts on their own lived experience (Milton, 2012; 2014). Taylor and DaWalt (2020) have highlighted the importance of including autistic women's voices, to increase our understanding of their lives and in particular their experience of the working world (Hayward et al., 2018b). Previous research has predominantly focused on general trends of employment for autistic individuals, however there is a gap in the research regarding the experiences of autistic women in navigating work and in particular autistic graduate women. This study therefore aims to address this gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of autistic graduate women in navigating the world of work. It also aims to contribute to the evidence-base by focusing on hearing the voices and perspectives of these women as they share their experiences of negotiating the employment landscape, to build a fuller picture and understanding of their working lives.

1.3 The Changing Shift in Autism Research

Since the identification of autism as a condition, the framing and widespread understanding of autism has been dominated by the medical model of disability (Evans, 2017; Silberman, 2015; Waltz, 2013). The medical model views autism as rooted within the individual where the person is perceived by their inherent impairments and deficits (Kapp,

2018; Milton, 2017). The medical model is grounded in the concept of ‘normalisation’ (Kapp, 2013). Here the focus is on identifying the individual’s key ‘symptoms’ to explore potential causes and to identify and develop prevention and cure strategies to mitigate these symptoms (Kapp, 2020; Milton & Bracher, 2013; Waltz, 2013). It seeks to eradicate what is seen as impairments that deviate from the norm (Milton & Bracher, 2013). As a result of this, the deficit theory, such as the theory of mind deficit (Baron-Cohen, 1997, 2002) has led to a belief that autistic individuals have fundamentally impaired social and emotional abilities thus viewing autism through a largely deficit-based lens (Chapple et al., 2021; Milton & Bracher, 2013). Influenced by this, research has tended to focus on altering the different socio-cognitive processing styles that result from being autistic (Pearson & Rose, 2021) and focused on interventions being developed that bring behaviours of autistic people closer to the behaviours associated with neurotypicality (Waltz, 2013). Within this, autistic individuals have been described as *“objects of inspection, rather than active participants in the research process”* (Milton & Bracher, 2013, p. 63).

Although a pathologised view of autism continues to remain influential in today’s media and general society, there is a gradual move towards understanding autism from a social model of disability (Kapp, 2020; Oliver, 1990, 1996). The social model of disability opposes the deficit-based assumption and explores how disability results from the disadvantages bounded in social construction and cultural norms (Kapp et al., 2013), ultimately viewing disability as created by society (Oliver, 2013). In viewing autism in this way, perceived neurocognitive differences can be seen as advantageous (Kapp, 2020). One of the most influential social movements that has brought about significant change in how autism is conceptualised is the neurodiversity movement (discussed further in Chapter Two) (Singer, 1998). From a neurodiversity perspective, autism is seen as one form of variation within a diversity of minds (Milton, 2020), with equal access to human rights (Singer, 2016). Within the neurodiversity movement, neurodiversity as a concept has been promoted and galvanised. An amplification of autistic viewpoints and autistic self-advocacy has ensued, which has led to the emergence of new ethical, and theoretical discussions and understandings about autism, as well as an increase in research focused on individual’s lived experiences. This has had a significant impact and has led to the development of

Milton's (2012) conceptualisation of the double empathy problem, which has reframed the understanding of autism. The double empathy problem negates the view that autistic individuals have a deficit or difficulty in theory of mind but refers to difficulties of reciprocity and mutuality between autistic and non-autistic people (Milton, 2012). Despite the fact these mutual difficulties can occur between any two people, it is perceived that the social realities of autistic and non-autistic people are more likely to differ, resulting in a breakdown of communication and two-way perspective taking difficulties (Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2018; Milton et al., 2022).

Shifts in the views of autism in the past decade, has led to repeated calls for a change in how autism research is being conducted (Milton & Bracher, 2013). Evident is the distinct divide between how clinicians and certain academics (Frith, 1989; Happe, 1994), have taken a more deficit perspective on autism research, compared to the "sociologically situated model of autism" (Milton, 2014, p. 794) which has been guided by autistic people themselves (Milton, 2012). Milton and Bracher (2013) in their paper titled: *'Autistics speak but are they heard?'* call for meaningful involvement of autistic individuals in knowledge making, both as researchers and participants and to explore the lived experiences and needs of autistic people. Nicolaidis et al., (2019), highlighted the need for more research exploring the lived experience of autistic adults, given that this has been the least attended to in autism research (Milton, 2014). This shift in autism research, highlighted by Milton and Bracher (2013) is slowly taking place and it is against this backdrop that this research is conducted.

Roche et al. (2021) recently conducted a systematic review of the research priorities of the autistic community and found that employment and work was one of the highest priorities identified as an area that warranted future research. More recently, Davies et al., (2023) reinforced the importance of exploring the workplace experiences of autistic people that are often missed in autism research in a study which explored autistic adults' priorities for autism employment research in the United Kingdom. They further highlighted that research into the work experiences of marginalised autistic groups should be conducted,

such as autistic women. This was further identified in a study conducted in the United States by Putman et al., (2023), where the autistic adults' priorities for autism research defined by gender identity was explored. They found that only autistic women wanted research to be conducted exploring supports for employment. While it did not suggest that men did not wish for research into employment, it strongly highlighted that the area of employment for autistic women was an area that warranted research. This shift of agenda in autism research is slowly taking precedence, and the need to explore the area of employment is central within this, forming a platform for this research.

1.4 The Local Context

The broader socio-economic, cultural, and political context within which this study takes place is important to consider. Given the age range of the participants, it was most likely that they were growing up from the period of the 1980s. The economic topography has drastically changed in the decades that followed. The 1980s in Ireland, was a decade of recession, unemployment and emigration and it was not until the 1990s that the economic boom hit Ireland in the form of the 'Celtic Tiger' (Kennedy, 2001). Ireland went from being one of the poorest countries in the European Union to being one of the richest and the unemployment rate fell from sixteen percent of the labour force in 1993 to less than six percent by 1999 (O'Hara & O'Shaughnessy, 2004). The boom continued until 2007, when the global financial crisis hit, and the economy of Ireland collapsed. Once again, the labour market was impacted, and unemployment figures began to grow again (O'Leary, 2011). The economy slowly recovered and today in Ireland, employment opportunities are in plentiful supply, but it does not guarantee work for all.

Work is perceived as a key marker of adulthood and citizenship (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2014) within twenty-first century Ireland. Work and employment are enshrined in the Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities (United Nations General Assembly, 2007), which was ratified by Ireland in 2018. Education is seen as a major factor in determining employment outcomes for autistic people and gaining a qualification at post-

secondary education further enhances one's employment prospects (Ohl et al., 2017). Ireland has in recent decades developed clear strategies to widen participation and promote inclusion in higher education for 'underrepresented groups' including autistic individuals (Conway, 2009). As a result, more young autistic adults are enrolling and entering higher education in greater numbers (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Barnhill, 2016; Nuske et al., 2019; Vincent & Fabri, 2022). In the academic year of 2020 to 2021, 17,866 students with disabilities were registered with Disability Services within twenty-five higher education institutes in the Republic of Ireland, representing 6.6 percent of the total student population reported by the responding institutions (n=269,488) (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2022). Of the 17,866 students, 8.3 percent were registered as autistic, representing 1,484 autistic individuals currently studying within higher education institutes within that academic year (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2022).

Improving the employability of all higher education students and supporting their transition into the workplace is one of the main goals in the European higher education area (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2018) and careers and disability services have been established to support graduates in this transition (Lewis et al., 2016; Pesonen et al., 2021). Despite the steps taken to improve supports at higher education, the transition from higher education into employment can present various barriers for autistic graduates such as access issues, concerns around disclosure, the need to be self-directed in gaining work, low expectations, difficulties building networks, and failure to provide the necessary supports and reasonable accommodations, thus denying and hindering many the opportunity to enter the workforce (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017; Pesonen et al., 2021; Vincent & Fabri, 2022). It is impossible, however, to predict the destination or outcome for autistic graduates when they finish or withdraw from higher education, given that there is no centralised database within Ireland that collates this data.

There is no official statistical data available in Ireland on the number of autistic graduates within the workplace nor autistic individuals within the workplace generally. The most

recent Irish census data from 2016 indicated that there were 643,131 disabled people in Ireland, and this accounted for approximately 13.5 percent of the general population (Central Statistics Office, 2016), of which 30.2 percent of them were employed, compared to 61.4 percent of the general population (Central Statistics Office, 2016). In 2018, Ireland had one of the lowest rates of disabled people in employment (36%) in comparison to non-disabled people in employment (66%) (Economic Research and Social Institute and National Disability Authority, 2021). While there was a 5.7% increase in the rate of disabled people working since the last census, this was less than half of the employment growth rate of non-disabled people (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE), 2022: p. 15). The recent European Commission Country Report for Ireland (2019) revealed that Ireland had one of the lowest employment rates for disabled people in the European Union, with 26.2 percent employed compared to 48.1 percent of people in the European Union in 2017 (European Commission, 2019). Given this, policies and laws have been introduced to support disabled people entering employment, these include the introduction of the Disability Act 2005 (Department of Health and Children, 2005), Employment Equality Acts 1998-2011 (Office of the Attorney General, 1998) and Equal Status Acts 2000-2012 (Department of Justice and Equality, 2013).

Yet, despite the introduction of these laws and policies, the figures of inclusion and unemployment have remained static over the past twenty years, even at the height of the economic boom (Government of Ireland, 2015). The reasons for this are potentially multifactorial, but it does indicate that there are other aspects which may be limiting and indirectly impacting disabled people entering employment. One important factor to note is that the Disability Act 2005 primarily relates to the public sector, and therefore does not apply to the private sector (Leonard, 2023). This in turn potentially limits disabled people from entering the private sector workforce due to limited access of supports and reasonable accommodations. More resources are needed for private firms so that they can provide adequate accommodations to disabled workers. Furthermore, disabled people in Ireland are more likely to be working in jobs that revolve around automation, indicating that they are at a higher risk of being replaced by technology (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2021). Disabled people in Ireland are entitled to

receive a payment known as the disability allowance, which is based on income thresholds and the employment status of the person (Boundless, 2022). Therefore, many individuals are less likely to work or may seek to work reduced hours or withdraw from the labour force entirely, due to fears of loss of benefits (Eurofound, 2022).

Despite the development of legislation and policies, the area of work and employment in the lives of autistic individuals in Ireland continues to remain unknown. A recent report which reviewed the operational effectiveness of existing services in addressing and supporting autistic individuals (Department of Health, 2018), highlighted work and employment as an identified need that required attention. One of the main recommendations out of the report stated:

“The implementation group should consider how best the HSE (Health Service Executive) can work with other agencies to support adults with ASD (autism) around issues such as education, employment, allowances etc.” (Department of Health, 2018, p. 22).

Despite this report, and its recommendations, it is unclear whether these recommendations were implemented and had an effect. Without formal statistics on the number of autistic individuals in work in Ireland, it is not possible to determine the employment profile of autistic individuals. AsIAm, an Irish autism organisation conducted their annual survey of cardholders (autistic individuals that use an identity card to support daily life) in 2020 and identified that 80 percent of respondents (n=498) were either unemployed or underemployed (AsIAm, 2021). Of those who confirmed they had a job in the survey (n=64), 30 percent stated that their current job did equate with their academic training, while 70 percent stated that they were underemployed. AsIAm highlighted the need for a change within the employment sector to ensure greater levels of inclusion within the workplace for autistic individuals in their cardholder’s report (AsIAm, 2021). More recently in a call for submissions for the development of an Autism Strategy in

Ireland, AsIAm highlighted the need for the Irish government to address unemployment and underemployment for autistic adults (AsIAm, 2022a). This highlights that employment is a priority area for the Irish autistic community which requires exploration to further understand the employment landscape in Ireland for autistic individuals.

1.5 The Current Study

1.5.1 The Research Question and Aims

The central research question which this study seeks to answer is:

- What are the experiences of autistic graduate women in navigating the world of work?

Under this guiding research question, the study aims to explore:

- The work journeys of autistic graduate women and the influences on these journeys.
- The experiences for these graduate women as they negotiate the world of work.
- What supports the graduate women in navigating work.

A secondary aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of the women of participating in the research.

1.5.2 Overview of the Research Design

The current state of knowledge in relation to autistic graduate women and work highlights limited understandings of the experiences in navigating work from the perspectives of autistic women. This study aims to address this research gap. It is positioned within a stance of ontological relativism and epistemological social constructivism (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) with the aim to explore the experiences of autistic graduate women navigating the world of work. This positioning allows for knowledge to be constructed and for the diversity of experiences to be explored (Crotty, 1998). To explore

this hidden group, I sought to find a methodological approach that would best fit with this theoretical standpoint, the research aims and question and to support the autistic women in sharing their experiences. I aimed to give voice to the women's lived experience (Solomon & Bagatell, 2010; van Schalkwyk & Dewinter, 2020), allowing for a rich description of their unique perspectives and experiences and the meaning they attributed to their experiences (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003; Wang & Geale, 2015). This was deemed most appropriate as the women are the 'experts' on their own lives (Crane et al., 2020; Milton & Bracher, 2013). Polkinghorne (1988) argues that we must pay attention to the stories that people tell. Stories demonstrate the way people make sense of, and create meaning in, their lives and further literature stresses the significance of employing first-hand accounts when investigating life experiences such as employment (Hayward et al., 2018; Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Milton & Bracher, 2013). Polkinghorne (1995) highlights that if research fails to understand people's lives, then it fails to address the real needs of individuals and it was for this reason that a narrative inquiry approach was employed.

In making these decisions, I conducted in-depth and multiple interviews with twelve autistic graduate women to explore their experiences and work stories. The two interviews were separately analysed using an analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995). The goal of analysis of narratives is to identify themes or concepts within and across the interviews collected as data (Polkinghorne, 1988). This process was guided by the six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The findings from the first interview (Study One) and second interview (Study Two) are presented as themes which both represent commonalities across the women's experience, as well as drawing out the diversity of experiences. Additionally, reflections on the research process from the perspective of the participants is presented as Study Three. Exploring the research aims and objectives and answering the research question was made possible by implementing the decisions outlined here and which are discussed in detail in the Methodology Chapter.

1.5.3 Significance of the Research

This research contributes a new understanding of the work experiences of autistic graduate women who have participated in and who have completed higher education, by employing a qualitative narrative inquiry approach (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Huber et al., 2013; Polkinghorne, 1988). It highlights the essence of the women's stories through the development of themes within, and across, the women's individual stories to highlight their experience of navigating the world of work. This is an area of research that has not received attention within the autism literature to date (Hayward et al., 2018b; Nagib & Wilton, 2020).

Autistic women have been hidden within the research literature, which has been dominated by men (Saxe, 2017) and therefore this research adds a unique contribution to the body of knowledge on autistic graduate women, by eliciting their stories and hearing their voices furthering our understandings of their lived experiences of work. This study represents the first to specifically explore the stories of autistic graduate women from their own perspectives and therefore contributes to new knowledge to both autism and employment research.

This research was conducted from a neurodiversity perspective, challenging the medicalised view of autism as a 'disorder' and as a 'deficit', towards one of difference and diversity. This reflects the growing call from the autistic community worldwide to conduct research from a neurodiversity-aligned perspective and to enable the voices of autistic individuals in order for us to listen and learn from their experiences, so that it is translatable to their lives (Milton & Bracher, 2013). Of note is the lack of research conducted which employs this neurodiversity perspective. Therefore, this study provides an important starting point for future collaboration between autistic women and researchers to work together and address the needs of this population.

Furthermore, the findings offer new knowledge informed by the actual experiences, perspectives, and views of autistic graduate women, which is relevant and can be translated into practice by developing neurodiverse affirmative employment supports and policies to support autistic women to thrive at work.

1.6 The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is presented across six chapters. Chapter One introduced the researcher and established the context for this research study conducted in Ireland, by presenting the background and rationale for the study. Additionally, it has introduced the research aims and research question of the study. It presents a short introduction on the methodology chosen to conduct the study, together with a brief description of the theoretical framework I utilised.

In Chapter Two a review of the current literature pertinent to the research aims and question is presented. The literature review is divided into four distinct sections: i.) Conceptualising autism, ii.) the discourse on autism and women, iii.) literature relating to the world of work and finally iv.) autistic graduate women and work. The literature review provides evidence in relation to what has been investigated within the field of autism research to date. It identifies the gap in the literature which highlights that autistic women are hidden from the discourse generally and even more so in relation to work and employment. Graduate autistic women do not appear to be featured within the body of the literature to date. It is against this background that this study exploring the experiences of autistic graduate women in navigating the world of work warrants investigation.

Chapter Three describes the methodological choices made and the methods chosen by the researcher to address the study aims and question. The decisions taken throughout the course of the research study are presented. Employing a social constructionist framework

is discussed and a detailed description of the narrative inquiry approach (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Huber et al., 2013; Polkinghorne, 1988), including a rationale for choosing this approach to explore the graduate women's experiences of work is outlined. The chapter provides details on the research design, and the procedures implemented for data collection. It also outlines the ethical and practical considerations, along with the actions taken, that guided me, as the researcher in conducting research with autistic women. A detailed account of the data analysis process employed is presented, together with a section describing how researcher reflexivity was managed throughout the research process.

Chapter Four is the first of the two chapters presenting the findings from this research study. A brief descriptive account of each of the individual women who participated in this study is presented. This is then followed by the findings from the first interviews conducted with the women, presented as Study One. The common themes identified from the women's stories in navigating the world of work are outlined.

Chapter Five is the second findings chapter and relates to the findings from the second interview conducted with the women, presented as Study Two. The findings in this chapter confirmed the findings of Study One and identified additional findings which illuminate the factors in supporting the women's success in navigating work. It further identifies the perceptions of how the working world could be improved to support autistic women in employment. The second section of this chapter presents; Study Three; this presents the reflections on the research process from the participant's perspectives gathered in Interview Two.

Chapter Six; the final chapter of the dissertation commences with a discussion on the principal findings of the study that support and extends existing literature and knowledge, as well as a discussion in relation to how these findings relate to the literature and the theoretical frameworks and perspectives. The contribution to knowledge will be clearly

outlined, together with identified recommendations and implications for employers, the autistic community, autistic graduate women, work policy, and practice. A critical evaluation of the study is presented with the strengths and limitations of the study outlined, as well as the identification of proposals for future research. The chapter is concluded with a short reflection by the researcher with some concluding comments.

2 Chapter Two - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This research study is an exploration of the experiences of autistic graduate women in navigating the world of work. The aim of this chapter is to review the most relevant literature that informed this study and to address areas that represent the primary discourse within the current research study. At the outset of this chapter the search strategy utilised to conduct this in-depth literature review will be detailed. The literature review is then presented under four main sections. The first section, section 2.3 will explore how the concept of autism has changed since its conception, it provides a backdrop from which to understand the context that has potentially impacted the lives of women at the centre of this present research study. This will be followed by an examination of the current literature and empirical research in relation to autism and women, that are pertinent to the study (section 2.4). Section 2.5 will explore the wider literature pertaining to the world of work for the autistic community. The literature presented underscores this current study because it relates to what is currently known about the experience of autistic individuals. While the final section (section 2.6) focuses on what is currently known about autistic graduate women and their experience of work. The literature review chapter concludes by highlighting the critical knowledge gap in relation to autistic women's experiences of work, in particular autistic women who have participated in higher education.

2.2 The Search Strategy

A comprehensive search of the literature relating to the area of work and employment in the lives of autistic individuals was completed on several occasions across the duration of this research study. A thorough search of international databases and electronic journals was conducted via the Trinity College Dublin Library Search Collections. The following databases were searched: 1. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2. PubMed, 3. PsychARTICLES, 4. PsycINFO, 5. CINAHL Complete, 6. AMED (Allied and Complementary

Medicine), 7. Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), 8. ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre), 9. JSTOR, and 10. Web of Science. The search terms used in varying combinations were: women, female, adult, gender, autism/autis*, autism spectrum disorder, autistic, aspergers, asperger syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder, neurodiversity, neuro-diverse, work, employment, job, career, job market, work programmes, and transition programmes. A search based upon more specialised or specific search terms was also later conducted given that these terms related to work and included disclosure, reasonable accommodations, strategies, facilitators, challenges, barriers, autistic burnout, identity, ableism, lived experience, discrimination, stigma, and attitudes.

I also searched several online journals using the initial search terms. The journals were specific to the areas relevant to the study and included: 1. Disability and Society, 2. Autism, 3. Journal of Management & Organization, 4. Autism in Adulthood, 5. Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 5. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders and 6. Advances in Autism; Improving international health outcomes in health, education, and social aspects of care. An online search by author name was also conducted to explore the works and writings of dominant writers in the field of autism, and then specifically autism and work, and employment. In addition to online searches, hand-searching through the reference lists of relevant articles was used to further identify relevant literature for the study. Government publications were also accessed along with core textbooks and autobiographies relating to autism and work. I also accessed the social media platform 'Twitter' to source relevant published material pertinent to the study. The autism community use this online platform to disseminate material and therefore it was deemed to be a useful point of access and information (Krcek, 2013; Brownlow & O'Dell, 2006). Finally, literature and material was also obtained through conferences, seminars, and webinars. The literature search procedures continued up until January 2024. No time-period restriction was used when searching for the literature and only articles published in English were included.

2.3 Conceptualising and Reconceptualising Autism

The concept of autism first classified by clinicians during the 1940s, has evolved and changed from its initial conception to the current understandings today; with an ever expansion of our understanding of autism from the prevalence of autism to the conceptualisation and definition of autism, through to research goals and how research is conducted (Loth et al., 2021). To truly understand the changing concept of autism, it is imperative to explore and focus on some of the theories and research behind autism. Initially, the main historical medical roots of the term and deficit-based theories and research will be critically reviewed. This is followed by an introduction to the social approaches to understanding autism, with a particular focus on the double empathy problem and the neurodiversity movement and framework, which has been driven by autistic advocates in more recent years (Kapp, 2020). In exploring autism as a concept, the terminology concerning autism will be subject to in-depth discussion and this is followed by the debate around autism and gender.

2.3.1 The History and Changing Concept of Autism

To have a true sense of the pervasive influence of the medical model on the understandings of autism, a historical understanding of the modern medical conceptualisations is explored. This is due to the fact that modern diagnostic criteria are still largely influenced from the original criteria which identified autism and its historical subtypes (Verhoeff, 2013; Waltz, 2013). The concept of autism did not specifically exist prior to the 1940s, although the term 'autism' was initially coined by the German Psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler in 1911 to describe a subset of symptoms which featured in his own created concept; schizophrenia (Bleuler, 1950; Evans, 2013; Kenny et al., 2016). According to Bleuler, autistic thinking was characterised by infantile desires and wishes to avoid unsatisfying realities and replace them with fantasies and hallucinations (Evans, 2013). It was defined as the child's symbolic 'inner life' (Bleuler, 1950[1911]: 63). However, Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger were the two practitioners that distinguished autism as a discrete concept in the 1940s (O'Reilly et al., 2020). Kanner (1944) described a group of eleven children that appeared to be

disengaged with their external environments, whom had a fixation on certain objects, and had an insistence of sameness. He also described how the children used language in a literal manner and failed to relate to people (Kanner, 1944). He described these children as 'autistic' (Waltz, 2013). Shortly after, a Viennese paediatrician, Hans Asperger made similar observations and published research that described children attending his clinic in Austria with the condition (Asperger, 1944, as cited Frith, 1991; Waltz, 2013). Asperger's work differentially focused on individuals having perceived enhanced language and communication skills and who were of average and above average intelligence (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019; Waltz, 2013).

Following this period, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) was published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1952, as a manual for diagnosing psychiatric conditions such as autism (American Psychiatric Association, 1952). At that time, autism was classified under the medical term of '*childhood schizophrenia*' and it wasn't until 1980 in the third version of the DSM that autism was recognised for the first time, as a distinct diagnostic classification; titled: 'Infantile Autism' (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). Further changes took place to the DSM in 1987, when the term '*autism disorder*' was used (American Psychiatric Association, 1987). The early 1990's saw huge steps by the American Psychiatric Association to revise the classification of autism disorder (Volkmar & Reichow, 2013). They conducted large scale literature reviews, data analysis and a large multi-site field trial across 1,000 cases worldwide to support their revisions (Volkmar & Reichow, 2013). The revisions aimed to balance sensitivity, with specificity, across the intellectual quotient range and age and tried to align itself with the International Classification of Diseases Version 10 (ICD-10) (World Health Organisation, 1992). After Asperger's ideas were brought to English-speaking countries (Frith, 1991; Wing, 1981), the influence on Western psychiatry led to the inclusion of 'Asperger Syndrome' as a separate subtype within the wider categorisation of 'autism' in 1994 the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Version-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Asperger Syndrome was differentiated from what was known as classic 'autism' by applying the diagnosis to individuals who did not have specific learning difficulties or specific language delays (Baron-Cohen, 2008; Waltz, 2013).

The concept of autism from the medical model perspective continued to change over the years and this was replicated across the diagnostic manuals. The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) was no exception to this. There was a significant change and substantial shift away from the concept put forward in the fourth edition. Asperger's Syndrome was merged into a unitary category, of a single diagnosis; '*autism spectrum disorder*' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Before its eventual removal and elimination as a diagnosis, there was significant concerns and much controversy within the autistic community that distinguishing Asperger Syndrome from autism may result, and potentially lead, to the establishment of a social hierarchy, within which lower perceived levels of disability would be deemed more favourable (De Hooze, 2019; Kapp & Ne'eman, 2020; Kenny et al., 2016; Kite et al., 2013; Volkmar & Reichow, 2013). It also had significant ramifications for persons who identified with their Asperger Syndrome/Asperger disorder identity (Mogenson & Mason, 2015; Smith & Jones, 2020). Although Asperger Syndrome has been removed as a diagnostic category within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), generally there has been an increased use of the terms high-functioning and low-functioning autism to describe autistic people and their level of functioning and support need in everyday life (Hens et al., 2019; Sequenzia, 2012). While these labels were not known as formal diagnoses, they were used frequently within medical environments and autism research (Baron-Cohen, 2000, 2008). These typologies have been criticised within the literature and by fellow autistic researchers for creating severity assumptions based on a person's engagement within society (Botha et al., 2022; Botha et al., 2023; Kapp & Ne'eman, 2020; Sequenzia, 2012). Furthermore, despite lobbying and significant rejections from the autistic community about introducing severity levels within the current DSM-V (Kapp & Ne'eman, 2020), these were ultimately included.

Despite the fact that a route to inclusion within the autistic community in more recent years has been through self-identification (Lewis, 2016), many autistic individuals continue to rely on medical diagnosis for identification (Leedham et al., 2020). In this case, the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental

Disorders (DSM-V) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and the World Health Organisation's (WHO) International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) (World Health Organisation, 2019) sections on mental, behavioural, or neurodevelopmental disorders, are the current diagnostic manuals utilised by medical professionals worldwide in making a diagnosis.

The medical model continues to have a pervasive influence in society around how autism is perceived and explored, from this view autism has been constructed within the medical paradigm, resulting in 'deficit' and 'impairment' conceptualisations and priorities (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013; Bunbury, 2019; Dinishak, 2016; Kapp, 2020; Robertson, 2010; Waltz, 2013). Medical professionals have depended on this perspective and have utilised these scientific deficit focused manuals and protocols (Krcek, 2013; Waltz, 2013). Ultimately, this has been the major driving force in how autism has been understood traditionally (Kapp, 2020). In attempting to explain what 'autism' is, deficit perspectives of autism have ensued and have been dominated by theories originating in cognitive-psychological theorising (Milton, 2019). These models include the theory of mind deficit (Baron-Cohen, 1991), executive dysfunction (Hill, 2004), weak coherence theory, and empathising-systemising theory (Baron-Cohen, 2008).

The medical model perspective assumes there is a need for a move towards normalisation, amelioration and elimination of conditions and disorders identified based on deficits (Waltz, 2013). Within this medical model realm of psychiatry and mental health, deficits have been based on behavioural deviations from the average (Haney & Cullen, 2018), whereby the person is viewed as the source of the problem or deficient in some way, necessitating medical intervention (Bunbury, 2019; Terzi, 2004), with a need to bring their behaviours closer to typical human neurocognition (Kapp et al., 2013; Waltz, 2013). Regularly, medical professionals and specialists are tasked with the job of rectifying or curing these impairments, seen as a tragedy, which ultimately patronises the autistic person (Woodhams & Corby, 2003) and as such research has therefore been driven to develop interventions to alter autistic behaviours (Pearson & Rose, 2021). This paradigm

perceives autism as a pathology for which people seek a diagnosis, thus autistic individuals can become defined by their condition (Haney & Cullen, 2018; Smith & Jones, 2020). This interpretation and language used to define autism has tended to dominate the discussion of autism in both scientific writings and in the popular press (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2016), resulting in a medicalised identity formation which can generate widespread negative connotations and perceptions within society (Bunbury, 2019; Krcek, 2013; Pearson & Rose, 2021). The fundamental problem with this deficit perspective is the fact that it assumes that there is a 'typical' form of human neurocognition, referred to as 'neurotypical' (Milton, 2020). It perceives that it is necessary to bring behaviours and thoughts closer to those associated with neurotypicality and within the mainstream culture of society (Grant & Kara, 2021; Milton, 2012; Waltz, 2013), ultimately disregarding the strengths of autistic individuals (Muth et al., 2014; Remington & Fairnie, 2017). Additionally, it does not take into account the disabling effects of society or context for autistic individuals, nor does it factor into account how society oppresses autistic individuals in terms of environmental, structural and attitudinal barriers which can impinge upon the lives of disabled people and which have the potential to impede and impact their inclusion within everyday society and progress in areas of life, such as employment, education and leisure, unless they are minimised or removed (Grant & Kara, 2021; Oliver 1996). Furthermore, the deficit perspective and the deficit focused theories utilised to explain autism have been strongly criticised by autistic scholars and activists (Lawson, 2010; Milton, 2012) for their lack of universality, specificity, and explanatory power in describing autism.

Although this narrow pathologised, deficit perspective of autism continues to remain influential across society, this perspective has been challenged (Krcek, 2013) and there has been a gradual move towards understanding autism through the social model of disability in more recent years (Kapp, 2020; Williams, 2021). The social interpretation of disability was first introduced by a group of disabled activists from the United Kingdom, who formed the 'Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation' (UPIAS) (Grant & Kara, 2021). They viewed that: *"it is society which disables"* people through factors such as inaccessible environments and inflexible institutions (The Union of the Physically Impaired Against

Segregation, 1975). Following the introduction of the 'social definition of disability' (Hunt, 2019), disabled academic; Mike Oliver coined the phrase the *social model of disability* in reference to these ideological developments (Oliver, 1990). Oliver's seminal 1990 book *The Politics of Disablement* is widely cited as a major moment in the adoption of the social model, with the intention to shift the focus of practical intervention away from targeting remediation of difficulties, towards changing professional practice and bringing about social changes (Oliver, 2004). The model posits that biological impairment is not the root cause of disability (Milton, 2019), but believes that disability results from disadvantages that stem from social structures and cultural norms and perceives that society discriminates those that experience differences by labelling, causing, and/or maintaining disability within that society (Kapp et al., 2013; Sasson et al., 2017). Furthermore, the social model does not seek to fully replace medical understandings, but rather offers the opportunity to respond to, and support the social needs of disabled individuals, by including them rather than excluding (Grant & Kara, 2021; Kapp, 2020). The social model is situated within a rights-based perspective. Swain and French (2004) maintain that the most central argument of the social model is the fact that it provides a critique of the medical model and allows the voice of disabled individuals to argue against social exclusion and oppression. For autistic individuals, the social model accounts for inherent disabilities, such as sensory-processing related disability, as well as socially constructed disability, such as disability that results from being stigmatised (Chapman, 2020; Kapp, 2020; Kapp et al., 2013). As a result, the social model of autism enables a view where neurocognitive differences can be framed as advantageous in enabling environments and contexts (Kapp, 2020; Lesser & Murray, 2020).

Arising from this social movement, and drawing encouragement from the broader disability rights movement, autistic advocates started to advocate for the need to build a more positive attitude towards autistic people (Krcek, 2013) and have attempted to de-pathologise autism (Kapp, 2020). The early 1990s began to see autistic activists speaking out and claiming their identity as autistic individuals (Dekker, 2020). One of the most notable autistic advocates in the 1990s was Jim Sinclair, he wrote '*Don't Mourn for Us*' (Sinclair, 1993) to voice a message to parents of autistic children. He wished to voice his

message whereby: parents of autistic children who were advocating for a cure for autism were mourning for the loss of the 'normal' child that they did not have. He identified that parents had an autistic child with his or her unique deficits and strengths as an individual. He advocated for an acceptance of the autistic child and identified autism as a pervasive experience that colours every part of the child's world—an inseparable part of identity (Sinclair, 1993).

An autistic sociologist Judy Singer (Singer, 1998) subsequently coined the term 'neurodiversity', in her Ph.D. thesis where she synthesized and combined critical disability studies with her first-person experience of growing up with three generations on the autistic spectrum (Singer, 1998, 1999). She described "a politics of neurological diversity, or neurodiversity", in which "the 'neurologically different' represent a new addition to the familiar political categories of class, gender and race and will augment the insights of the social model of disability" (Singer, 1999, p.60-61) and cites the American journalist Harvey Blume, as a frequent discussion partner (Blume, 1999). Singer was expressing a view which she saw emerging in the online autistic community, where autistic individuals were using the internet to share their experiences and ideas about autism without the difficulties that many of them experienced face-to-face (Dekker, 2020; Singer, 1999). She described the internet as a "prosthetic social device" (Singer, 1999, pp.62) that enabled the community to connect and voice their identities and feelings about their diagnosis and the wider implications for society (Armstrong, 2010; Brownlow & O'Dell, 2006; Dekker, 2020; Krcek, 2013). Through these developments and informed by first-person experiences, the neurodiversity movement and framework was established. The 2000s, saw the movement develop further in large part due to the voices, advocacy, and commitment of the autistic community, through developments in the online communication and networks (Bagatell, 2010; Kras, 2009). This has subsequently influenced and impacted on academic research, clinical practice, and general understandings of autism (Leadbitter et al., 2021). The term neurodiversity suggests that 'normality' is not a discrete state, but exists on multidimensional planes of unique thoughts, behaviors, and experiences (Solomon & Bagatell, 2010).

An underpinning principle of neurodiversity is the idea of a 'differently wired brain' (Ortega, 2009) and a central premise of the neurodiversity paradigm is that variations in neurological development and function across human beings is a natural and valuable aspect of human variation and therefore does not need to be pathologised (Kapp, 2020; Milton, 2020). Therefore, it accentuates the view that every person has a unique processing profile and do not need to be grouped into a singular socio-cognitive profile (Milton, 2020) with each autistic individual having unique differences (Kapp, 2020; Milton, 2020). It views and recognizes that autism is multifaceted, in which there are peaks and troughs of ability (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). Understanding and viewing autism through a neurodiverse lens means that autism is something a person is, rather than a person has (Bagatell, 2010; Krcek, 2013). Similarly, the neurodiversity framework acknowledges this sense of identity and shared culture within the autistic community (Kapp, 2020). It seeks to promote autism acceptance and provide a culture wherein autistic people feel pride in embracing autism as an inherent and integral part of their identity (Bagatell, 2010; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Kapp et al., 2013). As such, the movement is a counterargument to the medical model with the aim to prevent discrimination (Runswick-Cole, 2014), given that society tends to be organised around neurotypical values (Brownlow, 2010; Milton, 2020).

The neurodiversity framework and approach does not, however, negate associated disability (Leadbitter et al., 2021; Pantazakos & Vanaken, 2023). Rather, it considers sociocultural reasons for disablement (Shaw et al., 2021), it postulates that neurodivergent difference is not in individual dysfunctions, but is a poor fit between the individual and society, based on societal barriers that marginalise neurodivergent people, thus aligned with the social model of disability (Oliver, 1983, 1996; Shakespeare, 2006) and the perspective that autism is *"both biologically and socially derived"* (Milton, 2012, p. 866). It purports that autistic people do not need to change but rather sees that society creates barriers for autistic people to flourish and thrive, not just within the physical environment but more importantly the social environment, as attitudinal barriers to inclusion and acceptance are often significant and can result in autistic individuals being marginalised and discriminated within society (denHouting, 2019; Kapp et al., 2013; Kapp, 2020). This perspective allows for the needs of all autistic adults to be viewed without discrimination

or judgment (Kapp, 2020) and highlights that all autistic adults have a right to accommodations, supports, equitable access to society, and a high quality of life. As a result, the neurodiversity movement seeks to campaign against social exclusion of neurodivergent individuals, focusing on the need to promote inclusion and equity and calls for autistic people to be involved in all decision-making that affects the lives of autistic people from policy and institutional level and research to individual support (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Gernsbacher, 2007; Leadbitter et al., 2021; Nicolaidis, 2012).

Autistic individuals are increasingly involved in developing newer understandings of autism and this has resulted in a positive re-framing of how autism is understood and conceptualised (Chapple et al., 2021). The deficit descriptions and theories of autism, such as the theory of mind deficit discussed has been identified as being fundamentally flawed, given that it fails to account for the bi-directional nature of social interaction (Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2018). This perspective takes a one-sided approach to explaining the social challenges experienced by autistic individuals, where the onus lies with the person, rather than explaining social miscommunication and misunderstandings of perspective between autistic and non-autistic people (Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2018), whereby it is socially derived, as postulated by the neurodiversity movement. Considering this standpoint, Milton (2012) developed the double empathy problem which focuses on drawing attention to the difficulties of reciprocity and mutuality between autistic and non-autistic individuals. It identifies that there is a tendency to ignore the fact that social context and mutuality must be developed within a social interaction (Milton, 2012, 2020). Instead, it assumes that the same social norms exist for everyone, that can be learnt and applied across contexts for most individuals (Milton, 2020). However, Milton's (2012) double empathy problem emphasises this creation of mutuality within social interactions as being vital for reciprocal social encounters and interactions. Social communication breakdowns are then positioned as resulting from a failure to achieve mutuality and subsequent reciprocity within a given interaction (Milton, 2012), and are likely to result in breakdowns between individuals who have different processing styles (Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2018), therefore there is a stronger likelihood for a breakdown in communication between autistic and non-autistic individuals. Thus, non-autistic individuals are most likely to experience mutuality in their

everyday interactions because of not belonging to a neurominority (Botha, 2021; Milton, 2012), while autistic individuals are more likely to experience breakdowns in communication regularly as a result of being part of a neurominority (Milton, 2012).

These new developments in our understanding and conceptualisations of autism are increasing in its popularity and notability, as they offer a more progressive lens through which autism is viewed and conceptualised. Neurodiversity offers an emancipatory alternative to the long-standing deficit perspective of the medical model and autism as a pathology (Kapp et al., 2013; Robertson, 2010) and moves towards an approach driven by the autistic community where inclusion and equity is central (McVey et al., 2023). It is through this neurodiversity lens that the researcher views autism and is the perspective through which this study was undertaken.

2.3.2 Autism and Terminology

The changes in the concept of autism and how it has been described highlight that what is known and understood about autism is constantly changing and will continue to evolve (Jellett & Muggleton, 2022). This impacts on the way that autism is perceived, and understood by society (Kenny et al., 2016). With the radical shift away from the medical perspective, and societal attitudes towards autism changing to the neurodiversity perspective, there is a call to encourage people to communicate about autism using language that promotes autonomy and creates positive identities (Cooper et al., 2017; Gernsbacher, 2017; Kenny et al., 2016; Taboas et al., 2023). Proponents of the neurodiversity movement, such as Jim Sinclair have advocated for the use of identity-first language or disability-first language (Sinclair, 1999) over person-first language (Wright, 1983). This is advocated for as a means of shedding negative associations with autism and accepting that autism is central and integral to a person's identity (Bagatell, 2010; Kenny et al., 2016; Taboas et al., 2023; Vivanti, 2020). The use of identity-first language has been recommended and advised by autism organisations in Ireland (for example: Aslam, AslAm, 2019) and within academic journals (for example: Autism in Adulthood).

Recently three empirical studies have investigated the attitudes of the autistic community towards autism language and terminology. The first study conducted by Kenny et al. in 2016, surveyed 3,470 members of the United Kingdom's autism community; including autistic people, parents, and persons within the broader support network to explore their preferred ways of describing autism and their rationale for such preferences. It was found that there was no universally accepted term to describe autism within the community sample, however, what was of note was that autistic people differed from professionals in that autistic people preferred to use disability-first language. Professionals favoured person-first language, which was attributed to how they were taught at university (Kenny et al., 2016). Autistic persons in this study explained how using person-first language separated a person's autism from their identity and that this perpetuated the perspective that autism was a 'wrong' way of being and undermined the positive characteristics and aspects of autism (Kenny et al., 2016) which are aligned with the neurodiversity movement (Kapp, 2020). These findings echo Gernsbacher's (2017) arguments, where he contends that identity-first language, offers the opportunity to move away from branding and stigmatising disability and inspires positive identification which is associated with more positive outcomes and a sense of affiliation and belonging (Haslam et al., 2016), consistent with the neurodiversity framework and perspective.

The second of these three empirical studies was a study conducted in Australia by Bury, Jellett, Spoor and Hedley (2020). They sought to explore the terminology preferred by members of the autistic community in Australia, given the limited understanding of autism language globally. In their study, 198 Australian autistic adults rated their preferences in relation to various terms to describe autism. There was both similarities and differences in comparing their findings to Kenny et al.'s (2016) findings. One similarity highlighted the preferred use of the term autistic. However, they found that this term was also highly divisive among the group and raised the point that what is acceptable to one person may differ from the other (Robison, 2019). As a result, they concluded that it was important to ask people with a diagnosis what their preferred terms are and that researchers alike should be sensitive and respect individual preference in their engagement with the autistic community.

Following on from these studies, and more recently, Taboas and colleagues (2023), surveyed 728 United States autism stakeholders including autistic adults, parents of autistic children, professionals, family members/friends, and a comparison group of people with little to no experience with the autism community about their usage of, and preferences for, person-first language and identity-first language. Their aim was to explore whether individuals from the United States were similar in their opinions about the language preference for the set of identity-first language and person-first language terms used in the United Kingdom study (Kenny et al., 2016). It was found in this United States sample, that autistic adults preferred to self-identify using identity-first language (87%); while a sizable minority of adults with autism preferred to self-identify with person-first language (13%). Professionals were more likely to use, and choose person-first language terms, with over 60 percent identifying this preference.

These three studies indicate a clear consensus that the autistic community least favour the use of person-first language (Botha et al., 2023; Bury et al. 2020; Kapp et al. 2013; Kenny et al. 2016) and highlight that there is a need to move towards the use of inclusive language that respects individuals within the autistic community and to communicate with them in relation to the preferred language about their identity to truly embrace and hear their voices.

2.3.2 Autism and Gender

Historically, and since the initial conception of the term autism, it has long been suggested within research and literature that autism tends to be commonly associated with males (Driver & Chester, 2021; Fombonne, 2009). In the 1980s the estimated male to female ratio for autism was four-to-one, rising to ten-to-one for those identifying with Asperger's Syndrome (Dworzynski et al., 2012; Happe & Frith, 2020; Milner et al., 2019). Several theories were put forward during this time about autism, including Baron-Cohen's 'extreme male brain' (Baron-Cohen, 2010). It is more likely that the lower estimates of autism within the female population during this period was due to poor recognition of

autism within the female group. Furthermore, it was also estimated that the male-to-female ratio were based on numbers of registers of autistic people associated with clinical and special educational needs and support systems (Happé & Frith, 2020). However, these ratios and disparities have more recently been challenged by findings from epidemiological studies and samples with active case ascertainment, which have found considerably lower male preponderance, with the male to female ratios of autism within the general population groups to be 2.5:1 (Kim et al., 2011).

The first meta-analysis of the autism male-to-female ratio based on a systematic review of epidemiologic prevalence studies was recently conducted by Loomes, Hull and Mandy, (2017). The analysis examined fifty-four research studies, consisting of 13,784,284 participants, 53,712 of whom were diagnosed as autistic (43,972 boys and 9,740 girls). These studies were conducted in North America, Canada, the United Kingdom, Europe, Asia, Australia, and South America. The studies spanned a period of nineteen years from 1992 to 2011 and the average estimated prevalence of autism across all these studies was 61.9 per 10,000 people. They concluded that the male to female ratio is 3:1 and they identified that there is a diagnostic gender bias, whereby girls who meet criteria for autism are at a disproportionate risk of not receiving a diagnosis (Loomes et al., 2017).

The last decade has indicated that autistic women have been under-recognised and under-represented due to what has been described as different behavioural characteristics, ascertainment bias and bias in the traditional diagnostic processes and instrument that are used (Lai et al., 2011; Whitlock et al., 2020). As a result, women and girls are being missed, misdiagnosed, or undiagnosed (Bargiela et al., 2016; Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Harmens et al., 2022; Loomes et al., 2017; Milner et al., 2019). Many autistic women have been denied autistic identities due to stereotypes about autism (Tint & Weiss, 2018). Furthermore, there is also evidence that women are often diagnosed or learn that they are autistic later than men (Carpenter et al., 2019; Hayward et al., 2018a; Leedham et al., 2020; McCormick et al., 2020).

In attempting to account for the differences in diagnostic ratios and in trying to explore why autistic women and girls are a hidden group, researchers have drawn on two main concepts, which are contrasting, but are not mutually exclusive (Hull et al., 2020). The first concept argues that there is something inherent in being female that protects them from the likelihood of developing autism, known as the 'female protective effect theory' (Robison et al., 2013). This suggests that females require greater environmental and/or genetic risk than males to express the same degree of autistic characteristics (Robinson et al., 2013). While the other concept, a hypothesis known as the Female Autism Phenotype (Bargiela et al., 2016) purports that there is variation in the way males and females present and express themselves. Autism is expressed in qualitatively different ways in females which is not picked up by clinicians using the current conceptualisation of autism and its subsequent diagnostic tools which are inadvertently biased towards males (Happé & Frith, 2020; Hiller et al., 2014; Lai et al., 2015). Evidence suggests that autistic girls and women engage in more reciprocal conversation and are more motivated to engage in friendships when comparing them to autistic men and boys (Head et al., 2014; Lai et al., 2015). Girls are also said to be less likely to present externalising behaviours such as hyperactivity and are more likely to internalise their difficulties presenting as anxious, passive, or depressed (Attwood, 2007; Mandy et al., 2012). Women and girls employ 'camouflaging' and masking strategies to support their engagement and to minimise autistic traits, allowing them to blend in and fit in (Baldwin & Costley, 2016; Bargiela et al., 2016; Dean et al., 2017; Hull et al., 2017; Mo et al., 2022). As a result, autistic women are said to be a hidden group within the autistic community and it is only in more recent years, that autistic women are being recognised, prompting research into their gendered experience and the presentation of female autism (Seers & Hogg, 2023).

2.4 Autism and Women

The stereotypical perspective of autism being male dominated has resulted in autistic women remaining very under-represented in research, impacting our understanding of their experiences (Baldwin & Costley, 2016; Bennett & Goodall, 2022; Kirkovski et al., 2013;

Leedham et al., 2020; Seers & Hogg, 2021). Based on the historical understandings of autism, the needs of women are often difficult to recognise and may appear subtle, resulting in autistic women being a hidden group within the autistic community and autism literature and research (Gemma, 2021; Hull et al., 2020; Kanfischer et al., 2017; Saxe, 2017). Saxe (2017) argues that the lack of autistic women's experiences can be considered within an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), whereby autistic women are marginalised because of the prominent male autistic discourse and emphasises the importance of all women's voices being brought to the forefront (Piepmeier et al., 2014).

Since the publication of research which has accounted and highlighted the differences in identifying autism in men and women, academic literature about autistic women has evolved in the past decade (Bennett & Goodall, 2022; Mo et al., 2022; Seers & Hogg, 2023). The research has sought to illuminate the experiences of autistic women, to develop a deeper understanding of their worlds and to reduce the male-bias in the current understanding and recognition of autism (Bargiela et al., 2016; Kanfischer et al., 2017; Zener, 2019). The research on autistic women in more recent years has focused on a diversity of topics, such as exploring qualitative descriptions about being an autistic woman (Milner et al., 2019), puberty, and menopause (Cummins et al., 2020; Moseley et al., 2021; Steward, 2019), camouflaging and masking (Hull et al., 2020; Sunagawa, 2023), as well as the experiences in negotiating the diagnostic journey (Murphy et al., 2022). For the purposes of this literature review, literature and research pertaining to the diagnostic journey, experiences of being an autistic woman, as well as camouflaging and masking will be presented as they are aligned with the research focus and are directly relevant to the topic of study.

2.4.1 The Diagnostic Journey

Receiving a diagnosis of autism is an important milestone in a person's life (Leedham et al., 2020). However, undergoing the diagnostic journey as an autistic woman can be challenging and arduous (Begeer et al., 2013; Crane et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2022). Two review articles, which have integrated research findings with clinical experience (Green et

al., 2019; Zener, 2019) have highlighted that there are significant practical barriers in obtaining valid and reliable developmental histories (Green et al., 2019, Lai & Baron Cohen, 2015). Additionally, current 'gold standard' diagnostic tools to identify autism, such as the ADOS-2 (Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule, Second Edition) are normed upon a predominantly male sample population, (Ratto et al., 2017; Zener, 2019), thus further reinforcing the exclusion of women in receiving a diagnosis (Kreiser & White, 2014). Consequently, autism is therefore often missed, overshadowed, or women are misdiagnosed (Attwood, 2007; Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Milner et al., 2019; Zener, 2019). These experiences tend to have long-term consequences for women, without a diagnosis, messages of shame may affect the emerging identity of women, as they may internalise negative actions and experiences made by other (Hull et al., 2017). As a result, autistic women tend to feel that they are ostracised, are denied support, and labelled with other disabilities, which can in turn require these women to seek support for mental health difficulties (Cridland et al., 2014; Loomes et al., 2017).

A retrospective case notes analysis of 150 children and adults recently diagnosed as autistic in Scotland found evidence of delayed recognition of autism in females compared to males (Rutherford et al., 2016). Furthermore, in a large-scale European study by Scattoni et al., (2021) which sought to determine the gaps in autistic adult diagnostic evaluation and post-diagnostic support services, found that autistic men were more aware of where and how to access information about autism diagnosis compared to women. Similarly, an American based international study (Lewis, 2017) found that autistic women reported more austere barriers to diagnosis than men when seeking a diagnosis. They reported barriers in finding a specialist who specialises in gender and reported concerns that they would not be listened to or believed and that they would be blamed for their challenges (Lewis, 2017). These quantitative studies demonstrate that autistic women face significant barriers to accessing information and diagnosis. Qualitative research has further highlighted the experiences of these barriers and facilitators in seeking a diagnosis.

Murphy et al. (2022) identified various factors in exploring what helped and hindered Australian autistic women in the autism diagnostic process. Person-level factors related to the women's recognition of their autism, their motivation, and social support, while the provider-level factors related to the provider's knowledge, and their skills in working with autistic women and their dismissal of women's autistic traits. System level factors encompassed the practical aspects such as time and financial cost of diagnosis as well as the nature of the diagnostic tools.

A qualitative research study, using semi-structured interviews to explore the female experience of autism with fourteen women conducted by Bargiela et al., (2016), found that their diagnosis of autism went unidentified in childhood and in early to mid-adolescence. Most of the women were diagnosed between the ages of twenty and thirty years of age. The women described how their difficulties were ignored and misunderstood, they explained how they experienced mental health difficulties and how health professionals did not notice that their symptoms might be related to autism. Despite the women suspecting that they were autistic, five of the women explained how their concerns were dismissed by their general practitioners. Generally, the women described how a lack of understanding about autism and a general bias towards male autism by health professionals and teachers resulted in their late diagnosis. Most of the women; eight out of the fourteen participants discussed how their lives would have been easier had they received an early and timely diagnosis. The women described emotional reactions to the diagnosis and how they felt a sense of regret and anger around it. On the other hand, receiving the diagnosis bolstered positive experiences for some, as it fostered a sense of belonging for the women in a group of like-minded people, which offered them the ability to create a sense of community. The main rationale suggested by the women that influenced the late diagnosis was camouflaging behaviours and internalising and stereotyped understandings. The findings of Baldwin and Costley's (2016) research which presents self-report data from eighty-two autistic women in Australia also support the notion that females are historically disadvantaged by late diagnosis and/or accurate diagnosis. Over half (58%) of the women in their study stated that they received an autism diagnosis at or after the age of eighteen, with the mean age of diagnosis at twenty-five

years. The open-ended comments to the questions portrayed how life and early life, could have been supported with the knowledge of a diagnosis.

The findings from Bargiela et al.'s, (2016) and Baldwin and Costley's (2016) study are also like the findings of a United Kingdom based study conducted by Leedham et al. (2020). In this study of eleven women, mislabelling and misdiagnosis were common and women felt that they were not understood by professionals. The process of diagnosis was two-fold, for some, the assessment process was emotional for some of the women, who were required to account painful past experiences, while for others the diagnosis was a confirmation of what they already researched and offered a sense of validation and relief, a new lens through which to view past and current experiences. A small number of the participants struggled to find overall value and meaning in receiving the diagnosis while struggling with acceptance. However, others described it as meaning 'everything' (Leedham et al., 2020, p. 142). The impact of the diagnosis experienced by the women was seen as positive, many experienced supportive reactions and adaptations post-diagnosis, it also allowed the women to make sense of a part of their 'identity' and offered new understandings to celebrate their difference within a neurodiverse world.

In exploring diagnoses, Harmen's et al (2022) used a mixed-methods study to explore the well-being and identity of autistic women at three points across their diagnostic journey. Results indicated that obtaining a diagnosis improved the women's sense of wellbeing and identity at the point of diagnosis through providing validation and the provision of some answers, however for the women who were post diagnosis, it was evident that some struggled autistic identity and in accessing support. Most importantly and highlighted with the study echoed previous research findings, showing that the women struggled to be understood by professionals and indicated that the professionals were not adequately knowledgeable about autism in women. This led many of the women to feel unseen and risked validation of a diagnosis that they were seeking, which further impacted on their wellbeing and on their sense of identity. These studies highlight the adversity that many

autistic women face as they seek a diagnosis, but also highlight the multifaceted experiences that an autistic identity provides for these women.

2.4.2 Experiences of the Self

A common theme within existing studies exploring the experiences of autistic women is the experience of ‘feeling different’, misunderstood and wanting to ‘fit in’ socially (Bargiela et al., 2016; Kanfischer et al., 2017; Leedham et al., 2020; Milner et al., 2019; Zener, 2019). For many women this sense of difference begins in childhood and continues to permeate into adulthood (Milner et al., 2019). Autistic women have applied negative stereotypes to themselves, describing themselves as “weird” or a “misfit” (Botha et al., 2022, p. 10), or “not normal”, “wrong” or “defective” (Leedham et al., 2020, p. 139). This felt ‘difference’ is attributable to the difficulties the women experience in their interactions with friends and with society (Leedham et al., 2020; Stagg & Belcher, 2019) and is an inherent not knowing of what is causing their perceived differences, often because these women do not have an autism diagnosis (Baldwin & Costley, 2016). Without appropriate diagnosis and self-understanding, experiences can be complex and confusing for autistic women (Bargiela et al., 2016; Cridland et al., 2014). Autobiographies published by autistic women over the last two to three decades have begun to highlight and articulate this concept of feeling different and the women’s sense of exclusion within mainstream society (Holliday Willey, 1999; Simone; 2010).

Milner, McIntosh, Colvert and Happé (2019) interviewed eighteen autistic females in the United Kingdom, ranging in age from eleven to fifty-five and four mothers of autistic females to explore the female experience of autism. In this qualitative study, the concept of ‘feeling different’ was seen as one of the negative aspects of autism experienced by the girls and women. They felt different to those around them, from a young age, but didn’t quite understand why they were different. They referred to their sense of frustration and dislike for feeling this sense of difference and believed that it was more pronounced due

to a lack of understanding neurotypical social interaction, and they supposed that people around them noted that they were autistic. This sense of difference was also evident in a recent qualitative study conducted by Seers and Hogg (2023) with eight autistic women. Analysis of the women's interviews highlighted experiences of early marginalisation as children, whereby some of the women felt their own perceived sense of difference, but also experienced other perceptions of it. Furthermore, these findings are consistent and are reported in other studies of autistic adults, not specific to women however, whereby difference is described as a 'significant feeling of alienation and 'difference from others' (Punshon et al., 2009, p.281) and as 'awareness of being different' (Stagg & Belcher, 2019, p. 353).

Autistic women have shared experiences of negative self-perceptions, including feelings of inadequacy, shame, and self-doubt (Zener, 2019; Lilley et al., 2022). Lilley et al. (2022), identified the 'suffering self' and negative self-conceptions as themes in a study which explored both men and women's experiences of autism. Some women within Lilley et al.'s (2021) study used negative descriptions in describing themselves and discussed the concept of 'lacking as a person'. The women appeared to doubt themselves and their abilities. These findings align with the findings of Leedham and colleagues (2020), whereby women in their study reported that prior to diagnosis they held a devalued sense of self. They described how 'unsuccessful' attempts to connect socially with their peers led to internalised beliefs that they were 'wrong', 'broken' and 'bad' (Leedham et al., 2020, p. 138). What is consistent across all three of these studies (Leedham et al., 2020; Lilley et al., 2022; Milner et al., 2019) is that the women described and shared internalised views that they were intrinsically flawed and that they were different to others in society.

The differences experienced by these autistic women are often attributed to the difficulties with social interaction between autistic and non-autistic individuals, described as the 'double empathy problem' (Chown, 2014; Milton, 2012). As previously described, this theory proposes that autistic and non-autistic people can misunderstand and misinterpret feelings, behaviours, and communication of each other, given that communication is a two-

sided interaction (Milton, 2012). Autistic individuals are said to experience ‘acts of invalidation’ in the form of disapproving looks, or comments and this psycho-emotional disablism (Kelly et al., 2022, p. 16) impacts on a person’s wellbeing and self-esteem (Reeve, 2004) and can result in mental health difficulties (Beck et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2021).

2.4.3 Masking and Camouflaging

The perceived need and desire to ‘fit in’ experienced by autistic women and the perceived pressure by society to conform to social norms and daily life within a neurotypical world places significant pressure on autistic women (Bargiela et al., 2016). Autistic women are also said to be exposed to specific and general cultural expectations with regard to gendered roles and social relationships (Gemma, 2021; Kanfischer et al., 2017; Mo et al., 2022; Simone, 2010; Tierney et al., 2016). Women are expected by society to fulfil these expected normative roles and this places a further and significant burden on autistic women (Bargiela et al., 2016; Kanfischer et al., 2017). As a result, to reduce their vulnerability and to manage with the expectations of everyday life, some autistic women try to adapt and compensate to navigate and manage this social world with perceived neurotypical norms, utilising strategies to cover up their perceived difficulties in interacting, to fit in (Chapman et al., 2022; Cridland et al., 2014; Driver & Chester, 2021; Hull et al., 2017; Leedham et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2021; Seers & Hogg, 2023; Tint & Weiss, 2018), to avoid being perceived as visibly autistic (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019), as well as to maintain relationships (Hull et al., 2017). Masking, is said to be more prevalent among autistic women compared to men, suggesting that there the performance of femininity is more scrutinised, and policed (McQuaid et al., 2022). ‘Masking’, a term used by the autistic community (Milton & Sims, 2016), describes the suppression of aspects of self and identity to appear more ‘normal’ (Pearson & Rose, 2021). It has also been referred to in the literature as ‘camouflaging’, (Hull et al., 2017), ‘impression management’ (Ai et al., 2022; Schneid & Raz, 2020), compensation (Livingstone & Happe, 2017), ‘compensatory strategies’ (Seers & Hogg, 2023) and most recently ‘adaptive morphing’ (Lawson, 2020) are conscious and unconscious strategies, which have been specifically learned or implicitly developed to disguise, conceal and fit in (Hull et al., 2017; Hull et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2011).

By employing strategies, autistic women are attempting to hide behaviours and autistic traits that may be viewed and perceived as socially unacceptable by society, by deliberately pretending or performing social behaviours that are deemed to be more 'normal' and more neurotypical to conform to predefined social and moral expectations and shared worldviews (Dean et al., 2017; Hull et al., 2020; Jorgenson et al., 2020; Tierney et al., 2016; Willey, 1999). Camouflaging can be seen as a response to autism-related stigma (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Pearson & Rose, 2021), whereby a person may be stigmatised by discrediting autistic behaviours (Kapp et al., 2019), by the label of autism (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Huws & Jones, 2011) and/or due to differences in social and communication interaction (Sasson et al., 2017). Autistic persons are at risk of stigma (Botha & Frost, 2020), as a minority group and therefore in managing a stigmatised identity are likely to try and pass, 'fit in' or cover by camouflaging and masking (Pearson & Rose, 2021).

Masking is a multifaceted concept, literature suggests that it includes a conscious effort to make eye contact during conversations and interactions, efforts to deliberately learn and use neurotypical social skills to appear socially competent, memorising certain learned phrases or jokes, or following social scripts that have been carefully thought out in advance (Bargiela et al., 2016; Baldwin & Costley, 2016; Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015; Hull et al., 2017; Milner et al., 2019). It may also involve suppressing repetitive movements, also known as self-stimulations, such as twiddling hair or hand flapping (Kapp et al., 2019). It can also be unconscious, whereby a person may mimic or copy other people's gestures and expressions (Bargiela et al., 2016). As discussed previously, masking plays a role in the observed male preponderance in autism prevalence studies (Lai et al., 2017) and is an element of the female autism phenotype (Bargiela et al., 2016; Kirkovski et al., 2013; Lai et al., 2015).

Camouflaging and masking is frequently referred to in the autobiographies of autistic women and is now an emerging research area, whereby several studies using a qualitative method have been utilised to investigate camouflaging in autistic girls and women (Hull et al., 2020). Tierney, Burns and Kilbey (2016) interviewed ten autistic girls between the ages

of thirteen and sixteen in relation to managing social challenges associated with adolescence and the use of coping strategies. Common themes revealed that the desire to establish friendships motivated their use of camouflaging strategies, as well as the use of techniques to mask their difficulties and their feelings of unhappiness and anxiety in social situations. Comparable findings were also found during qualitative interviews with fourteen late diagnosed autistic women in a study conducted by Bargiela et al., (2016). They described masking as a common technique but not a universal tool to support them in disguising and concealing their autistic traits so that they could 'fit in'. The women described unconscious and conscious efforts to mask and camouflage to meet the expectations and the demands that the neurotypical world imposed on them. Cage and Troxell-Whiteman (2019) specifically explored the reasons and contexts of camouflaging in a sample of 262 autistic people. Their findings indicated that autistic women were more likely than autistic men to camouflage for 'conventional' reasons, whereby they wished to get by in formal settings such as education or work, as well as to manage their relationships with colleagues and/or classmates. Camouflaging in these situations, could be partly explained by the expectations placed on women within these conventional settings and the gendered expectations associated with their roles to manage other people's impressions of them (Cage & Troxell-Whiteman, 2019). These findings are similar to Bargiela et al.'s (2016) study where they found that the women in their study struggled to meet and fit in with the societal expectations associated with gender roles.

While masking and camouflaging may 'help' and support women to 'fit in' and navigate neurotypical society, and pass as normal (Bargiela et al., 2016), it has been described as a mentally and physically exhausting behaviour (Hull et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2021). Both anecdotal evidence and systematic research suggests that camouflaging can have an impact on a person's mental health and their wellbeing (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). In Hull et al.'s (2017) qualitative study which examined camouflaging experiences in 92 autistic adults, with questions focused on the nature, motivations, and consequences of camouflaging, it was found that camouflaging resulted in both short- and long-term consequences. Camouflaging was described by the participants as being mentally, physically, and emotionally draining requiring huge amounts of concentration, self-control,

and self-monitoring. Camouflaging also affected their mental health and affected their perception of themselves, which produced negative emotions and attitudes. Camouflaging has also been shown to affect autistic women's access to diagnosis and services as evidenced by a study conducted by Tint and Weiss (2018). In this study, twenty autistic women participated in focus groups and one of the key findings highlighted that camouflaging affected the women's ability to seek a diagnosis and, in some cases, prevented them from being diagnosed as they were dismissed by professionals, because they were seen as "not looking the part" (Tint & Weiss, 2018 p.930).

These qualitative research findings parallel with the findings of a quantitative study conducted by Cage et al. (2018), where participants who reported that they camouflaged were found to have greater symptoms of depression and felt that they were less accepted by others in society. They argued that social stigma towards autistic persons contributes to anxiety and depression, thereby increasing pressure to further mask and camouflage. Pearson and Rose (2021) identified that stigma against autistic behaviours is a further driver for masking and therefore can be seen as a stigma response to minority group status (Miller et al., 2021), which usually occurs within the context of social oppression. Camouflaging as a technique to 'pass' within society, comes at a significant cost to autistic woman's wellbeing, their sense of self, as well as the psychological functioning of autistic women. Some research indicates that camouflaging and masking can result in autistic burnout, which has been described as a state of exhaustion, distress, and incapacitation, impacting on all aspects of one's life (Mantzas et al., 2022b; Zener, 2019).

2.5 The World of Work and Autism

2.5.1 The Concept of Work and Changing Work Practices

Work is a socially normative activity and is said to be an integral component of a person's life, where an adult will likely spend much of their adult lives engaged in work (Braveman & Page, 2012; Griffin et al. 2014; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005; Farkas et al., 2021; Roux et

al., 2013; Wilczynski et al., 2013). Given that work can be said to be central to a person, Bruyere, Barrington, and Albrecht (2012) maintain that individuals are shaped by their work occupations. Engagement and entry into work and the labour market tends occur in early adulthood (Roux et al., 2015) and is perceived to be one of the normative developmental markers of a successful transition in adulthood (Osgood et al., 2005). Work has been identified to be an ambition for most individuals, including autistic persons (Buckley et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2017) and is the primary driver of economic success in the developed world.

Much has changed in the work landscape in more recent years, with the introduction of the information age and technological advances, as well as globalisation and changes in the services sector (Bird et al., 2002), where there has been a shift away from agriculture and manufacturing jobs to professional and business services, as well as health and social care services (Braveman & Page, 2012; Sullivan & Ariss, 2021). The types of work that individuals perform and engage in is also ever expanding with infinite variations and combinations including physical labour, cognitive and perceptual processing and problem solving, creative expression, work of a caring nature, as well as environmental supports and demands (Braveman & Page, 2012). Work and employment are said to reflect a person's individual talents, abilities, skills, and interests (Bruyere & Barrington, 2012; Gal et al., 2015). Furthermore, career development theorists have also noted that people undergo multiple career transitions, several times during the life course (De Vos et al., 2021; Savickas, 2002) and tend to make more transitions across the boundaries of occupations and work roles, businesses, organisations, functional areas, countries, and the labour market (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

Entrepreneurism has also been a driving force within the global labour market (Anderson & Ojediran, 2022; Palmer, et al., 2000; Prince et al., 2021), with the establishment of businesses and firms, on varying levels locally, nationally, and globally. Contemporary careers are more complex, highlighting flexible and different working patterns (Nalis et al., 2021). More people are working in part-time positions (Hayward et al., 2018b) or

embracing self-employment with its flexible working options (Budig, 2006; Dawson et al., 2009; Sammarra et al., 2013) to balance both working roles and other roles within society, as well as for the maintenance of health and wellbeing (Fagan et al., 2012). Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted hugely on work practices with more individuals now working remotely (Barone Gibbs et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021; Oomen et al., 2021). Working remotely has been facilitated by the advances in telecommunication and this has offered flexibility in working hours and settings.

The nature and context of work, and the workforce continues and will continue to change into the future as a result of how society evolves, with its changing demographics, greater diversity, and increased global integration and technology (Scully-Russ & Toracco, 2020).

2.5.2 Work as a Human Right

Employment is a human right and the importance of work globally to the wellbeing of people has been confirmed and is set out in Article 27: Work and Employment by the United Nations in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007). Therefore, all disabled persons must have the same rights as those that all non-disabled individuals in society enjoy (Hendricks, 2010; Scott et al., 2017). Ireland signed this Convention in 2007, and as a result the government of Ireland have been committed to its ratification since 2018. This ensures that disabled people have the right to work on an equal basis, have access to vocational support, training, and guidance, as well as the opportunity to seek employment in the public sector through promotional employment targets for disabled people, as well as identifying and highlighting that all disabled individuals have the right to be provided with reasonable accommodations within the workplace (Government of Ireland, 2015). As a result, several policies with a focus on equality, accessibility, and fairness have been developed in Ireland. The Disability Act 2005 (Department of Health and Children, 2005) was introduced in 2005 and places a statutory obligation on all public service providers to support access to services and facilities for disabled persons, including education and employment. From an educational perspective,

specific access programmes have been developed at third level to encourage and support disabled people to further their education, while at an employment level, all public bodies are required to ensure promotion and support of the employment of disabled people, with an obligation that at least three percent of the workforce are disabled (AHEAD, 2022; Department of Health and Children, 2005).

Additionally, two further pieces of key legislation were introduced to ensure equality in the employment of disabled people, these are titled; the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015 (Office of the Attorney General, 1998) and the Equal Status Acts 2000-2012 (Department of Justice and Equality, 2013). The Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015 (Office of the Attorney General, 1998), promote equality, and prohibit discrimination on nine grounds including disability. The Employment Equality Act also requires appropriate measures to be made for disabled people in relation to access, participation, and training in employment through the provision of reasonable accommodations to ensure that a disabled employee has equity of access and participation. The Equal Status Acts 2000-2012 aims to promote equality by also prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of disability, in employment, vocational training, advertising, and the provision of goods and services.

The introduction of this legislation has widened participation for disabled people in Ireland, most notably in education, where in the past two decades there has been considerable increases in the number of disabled students, accessing third level education (AHEAD, 2022; Conway, 2009; Quinn et al., 2014). As a result, more disabled students are enrolling and entering higher education (AHEAD, 2022; Barnhill, 2016) and are gaining third level qualifications, which in turn can support their employability post university (Ohl et al., 2017). Efforts have been made by the Irish Government to develop plans and supports for disabled persons accessing and maintaining employment. The Government of Ireland introduced the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2015-24, (Government of Ireland, 2015), as part of the National Disability Strategy Implementation Plan. This strategy aims to provide a coordinated approach to support disabled persons to progress into employment. It identifies six strategic priorities focusing on; the promotion

of education, skills, competence, and independence; the provision of individualised bridges and supports into work; the need to ensure that work pays; to support and promote job retention; the need for co-ordinated services and support and the need to support employers in recruiting and retaining disabled staff (Government of Ireland, 2015). Yet, despite these advances in increased access programmes and supports in education, as well as the introduction of employability legislation, policies and strategies, disabled people, continue to be underrepresented in the labour market both internationally and nationally whereby they do not experience the same access to work opportunities as do their counterparts without disabilities (Bonaccio et al., 2020).

2.5.3 Autism Employment Statistics

Internationally, employment rates for autistic adults fall well below the rate of employment for the general population (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020). Autistic adults are the most disadvantaged disability group within the literature with regard to employment, experiencing consistently lower employment rates compared to other disability groups (Chen et al., 2015; Dudley et al., 2015; Roux et al., 2013; Scott et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2012; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). The international studies report that up to sixty percent of autistic adults are unemployed, leaving only circa forty percent in the labour market (Hendricks, 2010; Howlin et al., 2013).

The rates of employment are comparable and similar across countries and regions (Hendricks, 2010). In Australia, 40.8 percent of autistic individuals aged between fifteen and 64 years of age are employed in the labour market which is under half the employment rate of the general population, at 83.2 percent and is also below the rate of employment for other disability groups (53.4%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Similar trends are observed in the United States, where the national Autism Indicators Report found that 38 percent of autistic individuals were in paid work (Roux et al., 2017). Canada has slightly lower rates of employment with just 33 percent of autistic adults between the ages of 20

and 64 years of age being employed in 2017, compared to fourteen per cent in 2012. Despite this increase in employment rate over this five-year period, the figure continues to be stark in comparison to the employment rate of eighty per cent for adults without a disability in Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2017).

Despite no official employment rates of autistic people in Europe nor in Ireland, Autism Europe estimate that approximately only ten percent of autistic people are employed across Europe (Autism Europe, 2019). Furthermore, AsIAm (2022) estimate that approximately 85 percent of autistic individuals are unemployed or underemployed in Ireland. These rates are significantly lower compared to the United States, Canada, and Australia and highlight the significant employment gap for autistic individuals within Europe and Ireland. However, there are limitations to these studies which limit the comparisons across countries and employment rates across studies, given that different methods of data collection are utilised to account for employment and unemployment rates, whereby no standardised tool is utilised.

The employment outcomes for autistic individuals have also indicated additional challenges for this population (Baldwin et al., 2014; Harvery et al., 2021; Maslahati et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2019). Many autistic individuals that are in employment, report poor and low earnings, experience periods of unemployment, are underemployed (in jobs that underutilise their knowledge, skills, and experience), or are malemployed (in unsuited positions) (Baldwin et al., 2014; Harvery et al., 2021; Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2004; Muller et al., 2003). Harvery et al. (2021) used baseline data from the Autism Cooperative Research Centre's Australian Longitudinal Study of Autism in Adulthood to explore the employment profiles of autistic adults and found that autistic adults were engaged in more part-time work with reduced hours and were employed at skills levels lower than their qualification in comparison to the general Australian workforce. Further to this, research also suggests that autistic individuals switch jobs more regularly which can result in fragmented work histories, ultimately potentially limiting their career development and progression (Baldwin et al., 2014; Hendricks, 2010; Muller et al., 2003).

A large-scale study conducted by Roux et al., (2013) which analysed data from wave five of the American National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2); a nationally representative survey of young adults who received special education services during high school found that most employed autistic adults made significantly lower money than adults with other disabilities and many worked in jobs that were considered entry-level. Taking a slightly different approach, an Australian study conducted by Baldwin, Costley, and Warren (2014) drew on data from a national survey, whereby they reported on the employment activities and experiences of one-hundred and thirty adults with Asperger's Disorder and autism. They found that eighty-six percent of participants held a post-school qualification, much higher than the general population, however respondents faced significant issues with 'overeducation', as close to half of the adults (45%) were working in jobs for which they were overqualified resulting in underemployment. These findings are similar to a recent study conducted by Maslahati et al., (2022) in Germany which found that above average levels of education but below rates of employment and high rates of financial dependency. However, this study sample was not necessarily representative of the general population of autistic adults in Germany as the sample were recruited from diagnostic services where participants were seeking support. These studies and findings demonstrate a poor employment situation for autistic individuals given the high levels of unemployment experienced. In making sense of these figures, it is therefore critical to explore the multitude of factors that influence employment for autistic individuals (Cope & Remington, 2022; Diener et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2020; Gemma, 2021).

2.5.4 Higher Education and Work

A significant transition to work takes place when young adults migrate from structured academic environments to the real world of work (Amir & Gati, 2006; Kowtha, 2011; Stalder, 2012; Takeuchi et al., 2021), known as the 'school-to-work transition' (Blustein et al., 2000; Takeuchi et al., 2021), and is quite common for all young people, (Nagele & Neuenschwander, 2014; Ng & Feldman, 2008). In more recent times, the transition from school or higher education to work has lengthened considerably (Salmela-Aro, 2013). This is as a result of the prospect and opportunity of prolonged and further education delaying

entry into the job market (Salmela-Aro, 2013), and in turn enhancing employment opportunities and offering an opportunity for disabled individuals to enhance their lives, empower themselves, and enjoy an independent life (Rodríguez et al., 2021).

More and more autistic individuals are successfully entering higher education in the western world (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, 2022; Bakker et al., 2019; Duerksen et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2023; Lucas et al., 2022; McPeake et al., 2023; Pesonen et al., 2022; Quinn, Gleeson & Nolan, 2014). Although autistic students attending higher education may experience barriers and challenges across their educational journey and are at a higher risk of not continuing with their studies (Cage & Howes, 2020; Quinn et al., 2014), many do successfully graduate (Anderson et al., 2017; McPeake et al., 2023; Pesonen et al., 2022; Richardson, 2017). Enhanced knowledge and skills through formal higher education increases the likelihood that autistic individuals will obtain a job and garner a good salary for their work (Migliore et al., 2012; Ohl et al., 2017; Rast et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2015), thus enhancing their employability outcomes (Gal et al., 2015). Whilst autistic individuals are a diverse population, those that enter college and higher education are likely to have an average or above average intelligence and possess skills and abilities which will further support them and is potentially advantageous, as they transition to the world of work (Holwerda et al., 2013; Scott et al., 2019) and many enter higher education with the goal that it will improve and enhance their career prospects (Cheriyian et al., 2021; Goldfarb et al., 2023).

Due to enhanced legislation and policies, which aims to support disabled students in education, universities and higher education institutes have moved towards inclusion (Morina & Biagiotti, 2022) with the introduction of supports being established to foster supportive learning environments; these include pre-university summer programs (Doyle, Gleeson, & Treanor, 2017; Lei et al., 2019), disability support services, such as one to one mentoring (Ames et al., 2015; Duerksen et al., 2021), peer support (Anderson et al., 2017) and transition to employment supports (Lewis et al., 2018; Lucas et al., 2022; VanSchalkwyk & Volkmar, 2017). Yet, despite the introduction of these supports, many autistic students

and graduates highlight the need for additional support in the transition from higher education to employment, given that this is a pivotal time in an individual's life which is marked with great change (Lucas et al., 2022). Worryingly, there is a paucity of studies examining the experiences of autistic graduates in their transition into employment and little is known about their experiences and their transition needs, as highlighted in a scoping review by Cashin in 2018.

A recent study by Pesonen et al., (2020) interviewed 17 current autistic students, two autistic students who had now completed their studies and 13 autistic graduates from countries including Finland, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Their findings identified that the career support and internships garnered during their higher education experience were valuable however they identified barriers to access in terms of the need to be self-directed in your obtaining employment. They considered that support was most beneficial when it was individualised to their needs and was provided in a supportive manner. A further study conducted by Pesonen et al. in 2021 with professionals, including careers advisors, academic tutors, and employers, qualitatively analysed suggested support strategies for autistic students in seeking employment post higher education. The professionals suggested that there was a need to take a person-centered approach and to be very focused on a strength's perspective with the need for autism acceptance in supporting autistic graduates in their transition to employment. Additionally, Lucas, Cage and James (2022) recently conducted a study with 34 autistic graduates from the United Kingdom utilising a mixed method approach, which explored their transition experiences. The participants reported very high levels of fear and low preparedness for the transition from higher education into employment. They further identified that they were not supported in making this transition or for their future career and highlighted the need for additional support in relation to life changes, career planning and employment accessibility. They suggested the need for autism specific support and advice. In conclusion, they summarised that support needed to be provided much earlier in the student educational journey and that it needed to be tailored to autistic student's needs.

These studies offer a snapshot into the needs of autistic graduates in their transition to employment and are essentially vital given that autistic graduates continue to experience barriers in their transition to employment (Cheriyen et al., 2021; Vincent, 2020; Vincent & Fabri, 2020). However, what is less understood is an analysis and understanding of the succession rates and employment rates of autistic graduates exiting higher education (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017; Vincent & Fabri, 2020). This data is missing from Irish research and general governmental statistics (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017) and therefore we must turn to our close neighbours to identify what these potential rates of succession are. Government figures in the United Kingdom highlighted that autistic graduates were over five times more likely to be unemployed six months after completing their higher education course when compared to their non-disabled peers (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). More recently, Allen and Coney (2019) in their report titled: 'What Happens Next? A report on the first destinations of 2017 disabled graduates', found that those that disclosed an autistic identity were the least likely than of any other disabled group in higher education to be engaged in full-time employment and highlighted that their employment outcomes were far worse than for any other group that has completed and gained postgraduate qualifications. These findings are particularly pertinent and concerning given that increasing numbers of young autistic adults are enrolling on higher education courses (Jackson et al., 2018).

2.5.5 The Benefits and Disadvantages of Work

Being employed and working is an ambition for many autistic people (Bennett & Dukes 2013; Roux et al. 2013; Scott et al., 2017; Wilczynski et al. 2013). Modern views of work perceive it to be an important and positive activity, not only from an economic standpoint, but is also a vital part of a person's wellbeing, contributing to an individual's meaning, identity, quality of life and life satisfaction (Blank & Hayward, 2009; Braveman & Page, 2012; Bruyere et al., 2012; Milner et al., 2015; Milner et al., 2014; Schall et al., 2020). The World Health Organisation (World Health Organisation, 2011) maintains that work provides a time structure, a routine, regular activity, social contact, social identity, and a

purpose which are vitally important for the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle. Work research demonstrates that a job is an important determinant of self-esteem and provides a connection between the person and society (Doyle et al., 2005). Social contacts and a social network established within work enables and supports social inclusion (Perkins et al., 2009; Saleh & Bruyère, 2018).

The intangible benefits of an enhanced quality of life and personal fulfilment that arise from participation in the labour market are also fundamental to autistic individual's overall wellbeing (Flower et al., 2019; Hedley et al., 2018). Employment enables and improves quality of life and promotes independence and personal dignity for autistic adults (Garcia-Villamizar et al., 2002; Garcia-Villamizar et al., 2000; Krieger et al., 2012; Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014). Improved cognitive and mental health outcomes are associated with employment (Chiang et al., 2013; Hendricks, 2010; Mavranetzouli et al., 2014). Work is a source of economic independence with the benefit of financial gain and rewards (Bölte, 2021). It enables autistic people to earn an income, support themselves and engage, participate in their interests, support daily life activities, and contribute to society, ensuring less reliance upon public and government funding (Capo, 2001; Chen et al., 2015; Howlin et al., 2005; Krieger et al., 2012; Rodríguez et al., 2021; Roux et al. 2013).

Contrastingly, unemployment and poor employment outcomes among autistic adults can negatively impact their socioeconomic status and can often contribute negatively to an individual's quality of life by increasing social isolation and creating a lack of cognitive and mental stimulation, which in turn places autistic individuals at risk of developing mental health difficulties (Barnay, 2016; Blustein, 2008; Blustein et al., 2013; Bruyere et al., 2012; Fleming et al., 2013; Gerhardt & Lainer, 2011; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009; Schofield et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2022; Wanberg, 2012). Experiences such as becoming unemployed, or job insecurity (i.e., expecting involuntary job loss) have shown to leave 'scarring effects' on peoples' long-term health and well-being (Clarke et al., 2001; De Witte, 2016). Milner et al., (2017), sought to investigate the effects of underemployment on the mental health of disabled people in Australia utilising the

Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey. Their results suggest that the combined impact of experiencing both disability and underemployment is associated with a greater decline in a person's mental health.

Despite, the many benefits and advantages that engagement and participation in work provides, there is a growing body of research which highlights some of the disadvantages and the negative aspects of work for autistic individuals (Feinstein, 2019; Garcia-Villamizar et al., 2002; Lin & Huang, 2019; Hayward et al., 2020; Raymaker et al., 2020; Wood & Happe, 2021), yet it is limited, weak and conflicting. Taking account of the neurodiversity perspective of autism, the world of work and its associated structures, systems, and environments are often said to be at odds with the challenges experienced by autistic individuals and can contribute to increased levels of stress and a deterioration of a person's wellbeing (Pearson & Rose, 2021). Over time, these high levels of stress as a result of engaging in the working world, with non-accommodating environments, such as overstimulating workplaces, can lead to experiences of burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020). Wood and Happe (2021), conducted an online survey with 149 autistic teachers and other autistic education staff to explore their views and experiences of being an autistic teacher. Their findings highlighted how environmental barriers, including insufficient support, unexpected changes and sensory distractions within the sensory environment resulted in significant mental health issues and high levels of fatigue. These circumstances resulted in many of the participants experiencing burnout, which led to them working reduced hours, stepping back from senior roles, an unwillingness for career progression and even resulted in some leaving the profession altogether.

Another recent study conducted in the Netherlands by Brouwers et al., (2023) explored the meaning of work for the subjective well-being of autistic adults with and without paid employment and aimed to evaluate the differences and similarities between these two groups. They conducted eight focus groups with a total of 64 autistic adults, 40 of whom were employed and 24 unemployed, of which 36 were female, 27 were male and one identified as other. Their findings highlighted that paid work was important for their well-

being, however, both groups also identified that paid employment and work was seriously damaging to their overall health and wellbeing and many participants discussed how they have personally experienced this. Of note was the high stress levels encountered by the participants and not respecting their own energy boundaries left some of the participants depleted, burned out, and damaged. Even in the groups of participants currently employed at the time of the study, many recalled how they had experienced one or more burnout episodes across their lives, while for those not working, the damage to their health was attributed as a reason why participants did not envision themselves ever working again.

Furthermore, occupational stress can also be seen as one of the most significant disadvantages experienced within the workplace for autistic individuals. Notably autistic employees have noted and reported instances of occupational stress (Baldwin et al., 2014; Hayward et al., 2018a) and these are likely to be linked to workplace conditions. Hayward et al., (2020) used an online survey to explore the occupational demands of work; for both autistic and non-autistic individuals. Their findings showed that autistic employees experienced greater social demands compared to non-autistic employees and this resulted in greater resource losses, with a greater emotional labour and toll on the employees, which has been identified as a key factor in burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). More recent research has started to explore the experience of 'autistic burnout' (Raymaker et al., 2020). Autistic burnout has been described as a state of chronic exhaustion, loss of skills, distress, and reduced tolerance to stimulus in every area of daily life (Raymaker et al., 2020). This term has long been used by autistic adults on online autistic communities to describe the negative consequences of living in a predominantly non-autistic and neurotypical world and unlike workplace burnout which has been previously well researched (Maslach et al., 2001), autistic burnout has only recently been explored and is almost completely absent from research and literature (Mantzas et al., 2022a; Higgins et al., 2021; Raymaker et al., 2020).

Furthermore, given that autistic employees are at risk of experiencing stereotyping, bias, and stigmatisation (Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Lindsay et al., 2019; Romualdez et al., 2021)

from supervisors and co-workers, this can further lead to experiences of stress and anxiety within the workplace, which negatively impacts on autistic employees. The significant ramifications as evident from the studies cited highlight not only the advantages of work, but also the disadvantages to work for autistic individuals.

2.5.6 Barriers to Employment

Work requires the navigation of complex social, physical, sensory, structural, cultural, and institutional environments which are dynamic, unpredictable, and ever changing (Shattuck & Roux, 2014; Van-Bergeijk et al., 2008). Although every autistic person is unique (Loth et al., 2021), autistic individuals are said to experience barriers in gaining and maintaining employment which contribute to the deeply problematic gap between the employment potential of autistic people and the reality of the employment outcomes they often obtain (Anderson et al., 2021; Baldwin et al., 2014; Black et al., 2020; Buckley et al., 2021; Bury et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2015; Flower et al., 2021; Harmuth et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2021; Lorenz et al., 2016; Sarrett, 2017; Scott et al., 2019). The past decade has seen an increased interest in research investigating the barriers to employment for autistic individuals in response to the high level of unemployment and underemployment experienced by the autistic community (Anderson et al., 2021; Baldwin et al., 2014; Barnhill, 2007; Chen et al., 2015; Harmuth et al., 2018; Hayward et al., 2018a, 2018b; Hendricks, 2010; Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2004; Ohl et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2019; Sharpe et al., 2022). However, evident across the employment literature to date is the dominant presence of the medical model perspective and a deficit construction of autism where the focus is on examining the significance of the core challenges of autism in influencing work prospects (Scott et al., 2018). By reframing the experience using the social model lens this shifts the focus from the individual as problematic to a consideration of the employment context as oppressive and prejudicing against autistic women (Oliver 1990). In this way challenges experienced in the workplace by autistic individuals stem from a workplace created and designed with neurotypicals in mind (Coleman & Adams, 2018). This sentiment is further echoed by autistic academics; Grant and Kara (2021), who identify that autistic people struggle to find

and keep jobs given that they are created by and for neurotypical people. From this context, the barriers to employment for autistic individuals will be discussed.

Evident across the literature is the significant number of research articles that describe the social challenges and demands experienced by autistic individuals working within the neurotypical working world, (AsIAM, 2022; Baldwin & Costley, 2016; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2022; Black et al., 2020; Cheriyan et al., 2021; Muller et al., 2003; Remington et al., 2022; Romualdez et al., 2021; Siedler & Idczak-Paceś, 2021; Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020; Whelpley & Perrault, 2021). This can include conforming to the social etiquette surrounding the application and interview stage, as well as navigating the social aspects and demands that are presented within the workplace environment (AsIAM, 2022; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2022; Black et al., 2020; Remington et al., 2022; Romualdez et al., 2021; Siedler & Idczak-Paceś, 2021; Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020; Whelpley & Perrault, 2021). Baldwin and Costley's (2016) study exploring the experiences of autistic women found that sixty percent of the women in their study highlighted that the social aspects of work were a significant challenge and deemed it one of the worst things about their employment experience. Furthermore, an Irish report conducted by AsIAM in collaboration with IrishJobs.ie (AsIAM, 2022) found almost four in five autistic people in Ireland face barriers to getting the job they want, they identified navigating the job interview process and different communication styles not being recognised or accommodated, as well as pressure to adhere to workplace 'social rules' or 'norms' as the most significant barriers.

Indeed, when social difficulties arise for autistic employees, employers may often attribute these difficulties to characteristics of the autistic people themselves (Bury et al., 2021). Autistic employees may also be more likely to attribute social challenges to their own internal characteristics and their embodied experience of being autistic as opposed to the systemic issues and to the social environment that disable individuals (Oliver, 1996). This can determine how individuals both autistic and non-autistic can lead to a failure of

empathy and understanding in both directions, known as the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012).

Equally, employer attitudes toward hiring and supporting autistic individuals can also be perceived as a barrier to employment and can ultimately determine whether people get a job and sustain a job (Buckley et al., 2021; Cooper & Kennady, 2021; Johnson & Joshi, 2016; López & Keenan, 2014; Nagib & Wilton, 2021; Sarrett, 2017; Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2021; Wood & Happe, 2023 Unger, 2002). López and Keenan (2014) conducted a survey that demonstrated that a lack of understanding from employers was a significant barrier to successful employment for autistic individuals. Despite, the general positivity towards employing autistic persons, as identified in studies by Scott et al. (2019) and Waisman-Nitzan et al. (2019) some employers continue to have misconceptions or a lack of understanding of autism (Cimera & Cowan, 2009; López & Keenan, 2014) and fail to support the needs of autistic individuals. Employers lack of comprehension at this stage of the employment process, ultimately impacts autistic employees, where gaining employment is diminished (Crompton et al., 2021).

Interviews are the most common type of selection instrument used by employers in the recruitment of staff (Poulakos, 2005) but being interviewed requires a places significant social demands on an individual and interviews have been identified as disabling by autistic individuals (Anderson et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2015; Hendricks, 2010; Lorenz et al., 2016; Maras et al., 2021; Sarrett, 2017; Scott et al., 2019; Strickland et al., 2013; Whelpley & Perrault, 2021). Studies have highlighted how interviews can be intimidating and elicit feelings of discomfort, anxiety, and nervousness for autistic persons (Anderson et al., 2021; Hendricks, 2010; McKnight-Lizotte, 2018; Siedler & Idczak-Paceś, 2021). In McKnight-Lizotte's (2018) qualitative study all six participants described interviews as anxiety provoking and this was related to concerns around the communication expectations placed on them such as the verbal and non-verbal components of the interview process including finding the right words, answering the questions, and using eye contact and gestures.

Furthermore, Cooper and Kennady (2021), identified how autistic individuals tended to avoid interviews altogether.

Interviews tend to rely on open-ended, indirect questions (Levashina et al., 2014) and require interviewees to talk about past experiences. Such questions can be said to be ambiguous for autistic individuals to answer (Campion et al., 1998). Autistic persons are said to often provide very literal and honest responses to such questions, thus they may downplay their weaknesses and/or amplify their strengths, as well as struggle to elaborate (Lorenz et al., 2016; Maras et al., 2021; Vogeley et al., 2013). Scott et al., (2017) demonstrated that employers rated one in five autistic candidates as demonstrating challenges in navigating social demands at interview highlighting the challenge and barrier that this can present for autistic persons. Interviewing can be a disabling process and ableist in its approach, and there is most often a failure to change the process to meet the needs of the autistic community (Maras et al., 2021). There appears to be limited training being provided to interviewers regarding effective interviewing approaches to support candidates with disabilities in general to provide an equitable position for them (Erickson et al., 2014). Erickson, von Schrader, Bruyère, and VanLooy (2014) identified that only over half of organisations taking part in a large American based survey reported that training was provided to Human Resource staff and management in this area. It is therefore not surprising that interviewing is problematic to candidates with disabilities (Hebl & Skorinko, 2005) and which in turn could influence their successful recruitment (Hendricks, 2010; Roux et al., 2015).

Once employment is secured, day to day working involves a myriad of communications and social interactions on an ongoing and often intensive basis. These are referred to in the literature as either soft skills or social skills and are defined as having a positive attitude (Gilbride et al., 2003), working effectively with co-workers, and adhering to the unwritten socially normative behaviours expected within the workplace (Tyree et al., 2011). Adapting to a particular work setting requires individuals to constantly negotiate the social and cultural values of that place, when trying to maintain one's position within the workplace

(Scott et al., 2019). Baldwin and Costley (2016) identified how the autistic women in their study highlighted communication tasks such as exchanging pleasantries with colleagues and answering the telephone as being overwhelming. They also identified how 'formal' requirements such as meetings, group work and line management were complicated to negotiate. Autistic individuals also report that they experience high levels of stress and anxiety within the workplace (Hendricks, 2010), that potentially compounds their social disconnect (Milton, 2012).

Hurlbutt and Chalmers (2004), found that participants experienced high levels of stress and anxiety because of trying to understand the social norms and rules of the workplace, as well as trying to fit in with neurotypical colleagues. Feeling socially excluded is a risk factor for mental health difficulties (Mitchell et al., 2021). Indeed, previous studies have explored how autistic individuals often report experiences of stigma (Shtayermman 2009), misunderstandings and underestimation of their abilities (Heasman and Gillespie 2017) as well as neurotypical people generating more negative judgements and stereotypes in first impressions (Sasson et al., 2017) and dehumanising them (Cage et al., 2018), suggesting a 'double empathy problem' (Milton 2012). With the high rates of camouflaging reported in autistic people, as noted in section 2.4.3 in this literature review, it appears autistic people invest a significant amount of time and energy into understanding and trying to fit in to the neurotypical world, often to the detriment of their mental health, rather than neurotypical people attempting to understand autistic people's world and adapt accordingly, thus hindering a sense of belonging and impacting on a person's mental health in the workplace (Mitchell et al., 2021). Therefore, there is a need to examine the social norms and associated social culture within the workplace to prevent exclusion and segregation. There is an onus on employers to take responsibility for eliminating discrimination and segregation based on social misunderstandings (Milton, 2012).

In addition to a disabling social environment, several research studies have highlighted how sensory work environments also act as a barrier for autistic people within the workplace (Buckley et al., 2021; Gillott & Standen, 2007; Kirchner & Dziobek, 2014; Pfeiffer et al.,

2018). Many autistic people can be hypersensitive to the everyday sensations and stimuli such as light, sound and smell (Marco et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2007; Robertson & Simmons, 2015) and adverse responses to these can impact on a person's day-to-day living and make being in certain environments such as a large open plan offices challenging (Crane et al., 2009; Davidson & Henderson, 2010; Howe & Stagg, 2016; Marco et al., 2011). Sensory experiences are a personal and individualized experience (Ashburner et al., 2013; Kargas et al., 2015) and individuals react to certain stimuli in different ways (Smith & Sharp, 2013). A study by Gillott and Standen (2007) identified that sensory stimuli such as those listed above were a major stressor for autistic persons within the work environment. Overstimulating work environments were also identified as an issue in Muller et al.'s study (2003). Several participants in the study reported how they required a low distraction space to support their engagement in work tasks and highlighted how they were more able to work productively if there was minimal ambient sound, natural or incandescent rather than fluorescent lighting, and a calm and tranquil workspace. Davidson and Henderson (2010) found that external sensory stimuli are perceived very differently from that of neurotypical persons, which results in a sense of exclusion associated with being out of place in mainstream space in his study on the compilation of 45 autobiographical texts written by autistic adults. Arguably there is a lack of recognition of the disabling impact of environments on individuals leading to non-inclusive practice within workplaces.

The concept of 'universal design' is a helpful approach in assisting the design of more inclusive spaces, including workplaces (Milton, Martin & Melham, 2016). Universal design "is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (North Carolina State University, 2011). The Principles of Universal Design were developed by the Center for Universal Design (CUD, 1997), which aims to encourage the development of products and environments that are accessible to all. It is based on an integrative holistic approach that is for the benefit of all negating the inefficient system of multiple individual adaptations fitted retrospectively to try and solve access issues on an individual basis (Burgstahler & Russo-Gleicher, 2015; Martin et al., 2019; Milton et al., 2016). This is in line with a social model of disability as it moves from an individual to a universal approach. The

label of disability is frequently problematised, however universal design dissipates the difference experienced by those with disabilities and ensures inclusion. The principles of universal design are relevant to the design of workplaces, as it nurtures diversity and can reduce barriers for the participation of autistic persons, but it is also imperative that individual differences are also taken into account, as no one size fits all.

2.5.7 Disclosure and Attitudes

Disclosure and the process of disclosing an autism diagnosis is a complex process (Romualdez, et al., 2021) for many reasons, one of which is that autism is an invisible disability and autistic persons may experience greater challenges with disclosure compared to those with more visible disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2019). Disability disclosure has many nuances and is highly personal, deciding if, when and how to disclose, as well as considering the need to request reasonable accommodations can pose significant challenges (Lindsay et al., 2019; Romualdez et al., 2021).

The act of disclosing requires the autistic employee to engage in social communication to manage the disclosure process and this together with the natural pressures of work, as well as fear of discrimination and stigma further creates significant challenges in disclosing (Sarrett, 2017; Romualdez, et al., 2021). The fear of discrimination and stigma from employers and colleagues is a common reason for autistic individuals to decide not to disclose (Buckley et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2021). These perspectives and perceptions are not unfounded, and discrimination and stigma towards autistic employees exists within the workplace (Flower et al., 2019; Dovidio et al., 2001).

Furthermore, studies conducted with autistic employees have shown that they choose not to disclose their diagnoses due to the fear of discrimination from employers and colleagues (Sarrett, 2017). A recent qualitative study conducted by Romauldez, Walker and Remington in 2021 explored the factors and reasons why autistic employees choose to disclose or who

decided not to disclose and conceal their diagnosis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 autistic adults, twelve male and twelve female. The themes and sub-themes identified a wide variety of views on whether disclosure was beneficial. Some had a 'preference for keeping' their diagnosis private, nine participants chose not to disclose in previous roles, and they spoke about camouflaging and masking strategies used to manage difficult situations. Some also explained how they actively hid their diagnosis due to "fear of discrimination from others" (Romauldez et al., 2021, p. 5). Others felt that disclosure was important in the workplace to obtain workplace accommodations, and because previous negative experiences of non-disclosure resulted in significant negative experiences that they wished to avoid in the future. Additionally, disclosure had mixed outcomes for the participants resulting in problematic stereotyping, active discrimination, and disadvantages in the recruitment process. There were no significant differences in the disclosure experiences based on gender.

Choosing not to disclose may be an attractive and appealing option and position for many autistic employees when faced with the potential of discrimination and stigma (Gray, 2002), while there are also many benefits to disclosure to support autistic individuals in employment (Lindsay et al., 2019; Romualdez et al., 2021). Disclosure provides legal protection for autistic employees, enabling them to have access to reasonable work accommodations to ensure that autistic employees can engage and participate in employment on a level playing field. A systematic review by Lindsay et al. (2019), found that three out of twenty-six studies which were reviewed to explore disclosure and workplace accommodations for autistic workers, focused on the benefits and positive aspects of disclosing autism within the workplace. Some of the advantages of disclosing were noted as greater acceptance in the workplace and access to workplace accommodations. A study carried out by Sarret (2017) discovered that participants believed that increased awareness and advocacy around autism was a positive outcome in disclosing. Ohl et al. (2017) found that participants who did disclose to their employer were more than three times as likely to still be employed compared to those who did not disclose.

2.5.8 Workplace Accommodations

A variety of challenges and workplace barriers experienced by autistic persons may be mitigated and reduced by the introduction of reasonable accommodations (Khalifa et al., 2020). A reasonable accommodation is any action or modification to the tasks or structure of a job or workplace, that supports and helps alleviate a substantial disadvantage due to disability, to ensure that the person, can do their job fully and enjoy equal employment opportunities (Khalifa et al., 2020). The introduction of reasonable accommodations is more easily identifiable for persons with physical disabilities, as opposed to persons with hidden and invisible differences, such as autistic persons (Styers & Shultz, 2009).

The literature on autism employment provides evidence that reasonable accommodations are being implemented and used by many in employment (Baldwin et al., 2014; Gemma, 2021; Khalifa et al., 2020; Romualdez et al., 2021). Forty-six percent of studies reported in a systematic review which explored reasonable accommodations for autistic employees, conducted by Lindsay et al. (2019), indicated the various types of reasonable accommodations that are being implemented or desired by autistic people in the workplace. These included adjustments and modifications to the interview process, changes to a person's work schedule and responsibilities, as well as changes to the physical and sensory environment, where lighting and noise was examined, support with managing social and communication interactions was also identified as being an important accommodation to support autistic employees. A scoping review by Khalifa and colleagues (2020) found that 25 studies met their inclusion criteria in examining workplace accommodations for autistic persons, they utilised the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Functioning and Disability to organise the supports and accommodations to support autistic persons within the workplace. Most of the studies (n=21) examined were categorised as providing interventions related to the support for workplace relationships, and the most common example of support offered was a job coach.

Romualdez and colleagues (2021), explored diagnostic disclosure experiences of autistic adults in the workplace via an online survey which was completed by 238 autistic persons. They found that there were both positive and negative outcomes associated with the implementation of reasonable accommodations as a result of disclosure. Fourteen percent rated the access to reasonable accommodations as a positive outcome of disclosure, with some respondents explaining how supportive their employer was with the introduction of accommodations. However, thirteen percent referred to the lack of reasonable accommodations following disclosure, as it was deemed difficult to implement accommodations.

2.5.9 Autistic Advantage within the Workplace

The shift away from the deficit perspective of autism to a strengths and assets-based perspective in line with the neurodiversity paradigm has identified 'the autistic advantage', a term used to encapsulate the positive aspects and strengths associated with autism (Grant & Kara, 2021; Russell et al., 2019). The 'autistic advantage' has been cited in the autism employment literature, where it has been shown that autistic employees bring significant strengths, benefits, and skills to the workplace (Buckley et al., 2021; Grant & Kara, 2021; Hendricks, 2010; Russell et al., 2019). Autistic persons are believed to have stronger than neurotypical abilities in maintaining focus on specific tasks, they have greater attention to detail, as well as enhanced memory and creativity (Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014; Nowell et al., 2021). The kind of 'attention tunnelling', known as monotropism (Murray et al., 2005) and the ability for autistic persons to get into a 'flow' state (McDonnell & Milton, 2014), can result in highly productive employees, ultimately an asset within the world of work. In addition to these skills and attributes, there is a popular view, that autistic adults also exhibit many exemplary characteristics as employees, such as honesty, efficiency, precision, identification of logical rules, loyalty, empathy, consistency, low absenteeism, and a disinterest in 'office politics' (Hagner & Cooney 2005; Happe & Vital, 2009; Hillier et al. 2007; Muller et al. 2003).

A quantitative study conducted by Lorenz and Heinitz (2014) in Holland, surveyed 136 individuals with Asperger Syndrome and 155 neurotypical persons, online to explore their perceived occupational strengths and interests. The most frequently cited occupational strengths from the autistic sample indicated; attention to detail (73%), logical reasoning (60%), reliability (49%), focus (48%), consistency (40%), visual skills (36%) and creative solutions (35%). Similarly, Russell et al., (2019) conducted a qualitative study to ascertain the perceived strengths of autistic people in their daily lives, involving interviews with 28 autistic adults. Responses analysed using content and thematic techniques found that those who were in employment or were studying at university cited the ability to hyper focus and concentrate as a huge benefit. The skills and autistic advantage that autistic adults possess can be harnessed and fostered within the workplace (Baldwin, et al., 2014; Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014) to support increased employment rates and sustained job retention. A paper written by Grant and Kara (2021) provides first-hand accounts of autistic advantage as qualitative researchers working in the research field, where they outline their own professional strengths and discuss this considering the literature. They highlight their detailed knowledge of topic areas, as well as hyper focus and concentration as significant strengths to support them in their profession.

Employers have also experienced this autistic advantage, identifying the value that autistic individuals bring to the workplace (Hagner & Cooney, 2005; Krzeminska et al., 2019; Nicholas et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2017; Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2019). The work ethic of their autistic employees, their attention to detail, quality of work and their trustworthiness has been noted in studies conducted with employers (Nicholas et al., 2019). This strengths and assets based approach, is important as it has offered some balance to the traditional medical and deficit view of autism (Bury et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2019). However, it has been identified that much of what is known about autism advantage is based on anecdotes, perspectives from autistic individuals and clinical opinions, as identified by Bury et al., (2020) in their critical and systematic review on autism advantage in the workplace. In their conclusion, they identified that their review neither refuted or supported an autism advantage in employment but suggested that autistic advantage may not be inclusive of all autistic individuals, or across all situations, given the heterogeneity of autism (Loth et al.,

2021). They suggested that rather than identifying broad skills across autism, that research should adopt an individual approach rather than a disability approach (Bury et al., 2020). This is based on the view that an autism advantage may be based on a stereotypical view of autism and may not consider the individual differences, which would support and capture a fuller profile of the strengths of an individual but also capture their supports needs, in line with the neurodiversity perspective.

Russell et al., (2019) further discussed the potential negatives of the autistic advantage perspective, they highlighted how this focus on strengths, can tend to place significant pressure and potentially unreasonable expectations on autistic individuals to live up to, thus potentially impacting on a person's sense of value and self-esteem. Therefore, employers should continue to educate themselves on the advantages and benefits autistic employees can contribute to their organisation to ensure a more diverse and creative workforce (Roux et al., 2015). However, of note, they must also consider the individual differences and identify support needs with autistic individuals to optimise the person-job fit, and not develop a one-size-fits all approach, evident across some employment support programmes which have been established on the assumption that autistic employees will demonstrate specific skills in the workplace, such as attention to detail (Austin & Pisano, 2017). In utilising this individual difference approach, it accounts for the strengths and advantages that autistic individuals have but also recognises support needs, which can therefore enable a more optimal person-job fit and thus support sustainable and meaningful employment for autistic individuals in the long-term (Bury et al., 2019).

2.5.10 Employment Programmes

Given the high rates of unemployment experienced by autistic person's and the mounting evidence that autistic individuals may require support and assistance in gaining and maintaining employment (Howlin et al., 2004), there is a lack of empirical research regarding employment programmes and supports for autistic adults internationally (Baldwin et al., 2014; Nicholas et al., 2015; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011; Hedley et al., 2018).

Limited research is available on how best to support autistic employees and needs to be furthered (Chen et al., 2015; Remington et al., 2022).

Research is emerging on programmes and internships being developed by organisations which aim to support autistic individuals at work (Remington & Pellicano, 2019; Remington et al., 2022). One organisation founded in Denmark in 2004 and now internationally established with offices across Europe including Ireland is a company called Specialisterne, which aims to support autistic people to gain and maintain employment. Specialisterne partners with companies to remove the barriers to gaining and maintaining employment, by working with both businesses and candidates through the recruitment and employment maintenance phase. Large businesses such as SAP and Deutsche Bank have also established policies and programmes to support the recruitment of autistic employees. Remington and Pellicano (2019) carried out the first multi-informant, longitudinal study to examine an internship workplace scheme for autistic graduates at Deutsche Bank in the United Kingdom. These internships lasted for a three-month period. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the interns, hiring managers and colleagues and the results of the scheme demonstrated positive and meaningful experiences for the majority of those involved. One significant outcome was that five of the eight interns were subsequently hired and remained in Deutsche Bank following the conclusion of the programme.

A follow up study utilising the same model of internship took place 2017 and 2018 (Remington et al., 2022). Autistic candidates were recruited through adverts and were required to submit their curriculum vitae to the company. Candidates who were called for interview, were sent the interview questions via email, and were advised to return their answers within a week period. Then they underwent a face-to-face interview. Successful candidates were offered positions within the Deutsche Bank and were provided with an external mentor for support during the internship where check-ins were provided. Remington et al., (2022) compared the autistic intern's experiences to non-autistic interns and their managers by conducting semi-structured interviews and online questionnaires prior to and following the internship. The findings highlighted that autistic interns,

experienced notable success comparable to non-autistic interns, including increased self-confidence and enhanced productivity within the team. These studies highlight how organisations can support the employment of autistic individuals and more research needs to be conducted to support and maximise the development of such programmes in other organisations and businesses, given that they are primarily limited to specific employment sectors (e.g., IT and finance) and do not begin to address the full diversity of autistic people's interests and skills (Bernick, 2021; Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014).

2.6 Autistic Graduate Women and Work

While there is a growing body of literature on autism in employment, much of this literature is quantitative in nature and tends to focus on hard data, including statistics, types of employment, barriers to work and the nature of support, rather than the experiences of autistic employees themselves (Cooper & Kennady, 2021; Roux et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is a paucity of literature relating to autistic women in work (Gemma, 2021; Hayward et al., 2018b). A growing body of research indicates that autistic women are less likely to gain and maintain employment compared to men (Taylor et al., 2015) or are said to experience higher levels of underemployment in comparison to men (Hayward et al., 2018a, 2018b).

Gender could be deemed to be an important variable in the employment of women as Bargiela et al. (2016) suggest that autistic women have different experiences of autism in comparison to men. It has been identified in the literature that enhanced communication and social interaction skills of women can be deemed a key difference which can be seen to help moderate the challenges they experience and support them within the workplace (Head et al., 2014; Lai et al., 2011). Conversely, gender negatively impacts women in work (Joshi et al., 2015) and especially women with disabilities. The United Nations report that disabled women face considerably more vocational and employment barriers compared with both women without a disability, and men with a disability (United Nations, 2007).

Women also take-on gender-specific roles and family responsibilities which ultimately can impact their employment choices and maintenance of a career (Lindsay et al., 2017; Nagib & Wilton, 2020; 2021). Gender inequality also continues to exist within the workplace for women (England, 2005). Therefore, autistic women can experience intersecting gendered and disabling barriers which can create a 'double disadvantage' (Nagib & Wilson, 2020) to their participation in the labour market. In today's contemporary society more autistic individuals are entering higher education in greater numbers with the prospect of enhanced employment outcomes (Ohl et al., 2017) (also discussed in section 2.5.4 of this chapter). Evidence suggests that female autistic students' university enrolments could be as high as forty-seven percent (Dillenburger et al., 2016). Of the literature that does exist exploring autistic graduates transition from university to the world of work, we understand that they experience significant barriers (Cheriyen et al., 2021; Vincent & Fabri, 2020; Vincent, 2020). However once again this research is dominated by males, and is not disaggregated by gender, thus revealing the unknown experiences of autistic women, however more specifically, autistic graduate women, highlighting a significant gap in the literature.

In exploring what is known about autistic women from the current literature, we can see that much of what is understood is gleaned from surveys, with a paucity of studies employing first-hand accounts of autistic women's experiences (Seers & Hogg, 2021). The data in some of these studies does highlight educational attainment, while others do not, making it difficult to truly understand autistic graduate women's experiences, which would suggest that they have more favourable employment outcomes, compared to those that have not had the opportunity to participate in further education, which may make their employment outcomes more unfavourable (Kelly & Maitre, 2021) and these studies are explored.

A study conducted by Baldwin and Costley (2016), examined self-report data using an Australian-wide survey with 82 autistic women, exploring areas of health, education, and employment. Of the participants not enrolled in full time education at the time of the

survey, 62 percent had a paid job. Within this group, 60 percent were working part-time, while the remainder were working full time. The highest proportion of the women were employed in community and personal service work (24%), clerical and administrative work (24%), professional work (22%) and trades work (12%). Unemployment and underemployment were identified as significant issues for the women, 55 percent of the women held educational qualifications that far exceeded the skills required of their job. Barriers and challenges were identified by the women, with 60 percent identifying the social aspects of work as a challenge. Bullying within the workplace was also identified as an issue by 23 percent of participants. Twenty-nine percent were receiving support in the workplace and this support was identified as adjustments to the work environment or to job tasks, support from external agencies and support from managers and co-workers. The women stated that they wanted more support within the workplace, with a desire for greater understanding by others, support with developing skills and strategies associated with communication and more flexibility with work tasks and work hours. Thirty eight percent of the participants in the study (Baldwin & Costley, 2016) were not in employment at the time of the study. Fifty six percent of this group wanted a job, with the majority stating they would prefer part time employment, however, they maintained they had difficulties with securing such positions. Although the women had challenges within the workplace, they also stated that they were very ambitious and wanted to engage in further study and new careers, with many expressing a desire to engage in creative pursuits such as writing, and visual and performing arts. Baldwin and Costley (2016) concluded their study highlighting that women may experience a range of subtle and subjective differences and experiences compared to men, which warrants further qualitative investigation.

A recent systematic review conducted by Hayward, Stokes and McVilly (2018b), sought to synthesise what is known about the labour market experiences of autistic women. Eleven studies met the inclusion criteria, but no studies solely focused on women. Only one paper differentiated women from men when presenting their findings (Muller et al., 2003). Of the eleven articles reviewed, most employed survey as their main method of data collection, with three articles utilising interviews, with a further autobiographical account

included and a narrative research study included. The review highlighted the challenges in the workplace for autistic adults generally with underemployment, unemployment, and difficulty in maintaining employment as the main issues. Other challenges included difficulties with communication and social interaction, stress and mental health difficulties, sensory challenges associated with unaccommodating environments and awareness from colleagues within the workplace. However, given the paucity and insufficient quality of research available, the results must be interpreted with caution. It is suggested that the challenges for autistic women might be similar to autistic men, but further research is warranted and requires attention to gain an accurate insight into the experiences of these women.

Additional studies have focused on autistic women (Gemma, 2021; Hayward et al., 2019; Nagib & Wilton, 2020, 2021) and have been published after the systematic review by Hayward et al. (2018b). Hayward, McVilly and Stokes (2019) sought to understand the employment expectations of 89 participants (34 autistic women, 32 typically developing women and 23 autistic men) using an online survey with open-ended responses conducted in Australia. Three themes were generated from the data; fit, stable employment and low hope for meaningful work and were compared by autism diagnosis and gender. There were no gender differences on occupational experiences between men and women and the autistic women shared similar career aspirations to the autistic men in the study. Autistic women differed from typically developing women in stating the need for a good job-person-environment fit to thrive within work. They also identified that they wanted to be themselves in work and wished to feel accepted and as part of a team, as well as valued. This study adds to the understanding of the experiences of autistic women; however, this study did not solely focus on autistic women. The research is limited by the method in which the data was collected using a single open-ended survey and therefore does not capture the rich essence of the women's experiences.

Gemma (2021) utilised two focus groups and ten individual interviews with fifteen women to explore the difficulties and advantages of being autistic and a woman within the

workplace. The key themes which emerged from the research highlighted how disability and gender intersected to create negative outcomes for the women. The women experienced gender discrimination and felt the need to fit in based on gender assumptions and expectations within the workplace. The women shared the perspective that reasonable accommodations were prescribed by employers without discussion and these accommodations inconvenienced employers. Employers were seen to be failing to meet the needs of their employees and hence discriminated against them.

Due to the paucity of research available and its limitations discussed above, there remains a need to improve our understanding of the experiences of autistic graduate women in work. This is essential to gain a better understanding of their experiences, their journeys and their support needs to improve workplace participation and to support the formulation of workplace policy and practice.

2.7 Key Messages and Conclusion

The review of literature in this chapter interrogated current research across four broad areas, relevant to the autistic women, their experiences and work. In the first section, literature relating to the changing concept of autism over the last few decades was discussed, highlighting the significant changes in our understanding of autism, as well as the paradigms and lens through which it is viewed. The reconceptualization and the drive from the neurodiversity movement with a move away from the historical medical and deficit perspective of autism to a 'difference' perspective has significantly changed the narrative of autism in society, as well as autism research. Autism which was once believed to be a childhood 'disorder', with the dominant research focus on children has now shifted to studies and research exploring autistic individuals' experiences from a life span perspective. This reconceptualization of autism points towards the need for research studies to employ a neurodiversity lens in its perspective. Secondly, the literature has highlighted the need for a move and a need to understanding autistic

women's experiences, given that the research to date has predominantly focused on men. In the third section, employment and work, a central aspect of adulthood was explored. All persons have a right to employment, however research pertaining to autistic individuals' employment outcomes presents a bleak picture with high levels of unemployment and underemployment. However much of what is known about autism and work tends to be dominated by male samples, with little known about autistic women and work. Work is often shaped by educational attainment however once again we are unsure as to the trajectories and experiences of autistic graduates and even more so autistic graduate women. Employment experiences and working journeys for autistic graduate women are not well understood, therefore greater understanding is needed to ascertain employment experiences and outcomes for these women.

Many of the peer reviewed academic papers which are presented in this literature are steeped in the medical or pathologised model of autism (Walker, 2014) and furthermore, the work literature is primarily concerned with the comparative outcomes of employment data rather than on insights into personal experiences of work from the perspective of autistic graduate women. As identified in the conceptualising of autism and reconceptualization of autism and the move towards a more social model and autism rights perspective including the neurodiversity perspective it is likely that more research will reflect the voices of autistic individuals and the nature of the barriers associated with the context of work and employment. This study therefore aims to address this gap in the research. This research study is in direct contrast to the overall current literature as it is solely concerned with hearing the voices of autistic graduate women in relation to their perceptions and experience of the world of work within the context of Ireland.

The conclusions drawn from the literature review have provided a clear rationale for this current study. These conclusions include 1.) a clearly identified gap in current literature relating to the work experiences of autistic women 2.) furthermore a lack of understanding about the experiences of autistic women who have successfully participated in higher education and have graduated and entered the workplace, as well as understandings about

their employment path 3.) recognition of the importance of exploring the subjective and first-hand accounts of autistic women to highlight their voice and contribute to knowledge production 4.) a paucity of research and literature employing a neurodiversity lens through which to conduct research.

The next chapter presents a description and rationale for the methodology chosen and the methods utilised to address the gaps in the literature and to answer the research question.

3 Chapter Three - Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The first chapter of this dissertation provided a background and rationale for conducting this study which sought to explore autistic graduate women's experiences in navigating the world of work. Following this chapter two, presented and examined the key literature pertinent to the study. The purpose of this chapter is to firstly identify the research aims and question and to describe and justify the methodological approach chosen to address the research question. This chapter is divided into two sections and describes the methodology and the methods chosen for this study. The first section situates the study within a qualitative paradigm, where a description of the philosophical and theoretical orientations and underpinnings are presented. The broad narrative orientation is discussed and the rationale for using a narrative inquiry framework is provided. The second section of the chapter provides a detailed description of the research methods employed, including the recruitment of the participants, the narrative inquiry methods chosen for data collection and the data analysis process employed by the researcher. At all times ethical considerations were key to the research process and the considerations and actions that were undertaken in conducting research with the autistic community are discussed. Furthermore, a detailed description of researcher reflexivity employed throughout the study is presented.

3.2 Research Question and Aims

The central research question which this study seeks to answer is:

- What are the experiences of autistic graduate women in navigating the world of work?

Under this guiding research question, the study aims to explore:

- The work journeys of autistic graduate women and the influences on these journeys.
- The experiences for these graduate women as they negotiate the world of work.
- What supports the graduate women in navigating work.

A secondary aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of the women of participating in the research.

3.3 Philosophical Framework and Approach

This research study is situated within a structure of ontological and epistemological perspectives, and philosophical beliefs which guided the actions taken throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The study is grounded within an ontological relativism and an epistemological social constructivist standpoint (Braun & Clark, 2013). It purports that there are multiple realities rather than one single reality and ultimate truth (Bryman, 2015; Creswell, 2013). A social constructionist perspective is taken, given that individuals construct their own worlds through knowledge and understanding and through these events and experiences they make sense of them (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Galbin, 2014; Patton, 2014). Meaning is attributed to the events and experiences in which individuals engage and is constructed on an ongoing basis through interaction and engagement with the environment (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Crotty, 1998). This study is not searching for the absolute truth, no one single experience or absolute truth in how autistic graduate women experience and navigate the world of work exists, however, this study grounds itself within the belief that multiple truths and experiences exist. Each woman's experience is unique and valid, and this approach appreciates the social world in which these women live, and which impacts on their experiences and the stories that they tell (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2017; Schwandt, 2000). Braun and Clarke (2013) highlight that the process of knowledge production is empirical in that it is grounded in data and understanding and recognises that knowledge is socially constructed (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Furthermore, this research grounded within a social constructionist framework, fits well within this open-ended inquiry through which the women's subjective and intersubjective realities can be explored

within an interpretivist paradigm, creating a space for multiple and diverse experiences of the women to be examined.

3.4 Choosing a Qualitative Research Approach

Yerxa (1987) describes research as a 'systematic way of observing some aspect of the world and describing it so that it can be better understood... It is a pursuit of understanding' (Yerxa, 1987, pp.415). It involves purposive and rigorous investigation which aims to generate new knowledge (Sarantakos, 2005). Taking a social constructivist lens led to the development of employing a qualitative approach to this study. Qualitative research takes account of the natural contexts in which individuals or groups function to provide an in-depth understanding of real-world problems (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Polit & Beck, 2017). It is associated with the constructivist paradigm which began as a counter movement to the positivistic paradigm associated with quantitative research (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Where positivism assumes that there is an orderly reality that can be objectively studied, constructivism holds that there are multiple interpretations of reality and that the goal of the research is to understand how individuals construct reality within their natural context (Polit & Beck, 2017). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argue that reliance on positivistic research can be deemed unfit to address complex research questions such as the one discussed here in this study.

The qualitative research stance affords the capacity to capture human behaviours, experiences, and emotions that quantitative approaches cannot (Krausz & Meszaro, 2005; Lutz, et al., 2005). It is an interpretative process, seeking to understand the meanings people bring to the phenomenon under investigation, it is a naturalistic mode of enquiry, exploring and understanding the world in which people inhabit (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; 2011; Outwaite & Turner, 2007; Silverman, 2017). Qualitative researchers want to understand the meanings associated with the experiences at a particular point in time and in a particular context (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Riessman &

Speedy, 2007). Qualitative research is conducted to 'empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimise the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study' (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). That is not to say that the participant can be completely free from the influence of the researcher and their paradigmatic choices (Dowse, 2001), but it is to say that there is more value in adopting research approaches, that allow autistic women to articulate their own meanings of their own experiences in their own ways thereby empowering them. I am interested in hearing directly from autistic graduate women about their experiences of work and their employment journey. Thus, a qualitative approach is the most appropriate method for addressing the research question.

Much of the research relating to autism is dominated by quantitative methods (Bolte, 2014), and the existing literature exploring autism in women has highlighted this predominance (Kanfischer et al., 2017; Seers & Hogg, 2021). There have been calls from the autistic community to move away from tests and measurements employed in quantitative research, within which a dominant deficit and medical model of autism is often employed (Botha, 2021; Hens et al., 2019; Milton & Bracher, 2013; Milton, 2014; McCrimmon & Montgomery, 2014; Nicolaidis et al., 2011; Solomon & Bagatell, 2010), towards a more collaborative engagement, whereby autistic persons are involved in creating and building a greater knowledge bank (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Gowen et al., 2019; Milton et al., 2012; Milton, 2014; Tint & Weiss, 2018), because traditionally, autism research has been conducted on autistic people and their families, without the involvement of those with insider expertise (Lory, 2018; Milton, 2014; Stark et al., 2020). This gap in this research understanding has been said to lead to a distrust and offence by autistic individuals, whereby they have been examined (Milton & Moon, 2012). Baldwin and Costley (2016) highlight that autism research exploring personal experiences needs to take place to build a clearer picture of the experiences of autistic women within society.

Qualitative studies by their nature seek to prioritise people's interpretations of their experience and are based on flexible data collection methods and methods of analysis that

search for meaning and understanding of complexity of experiences (Mason, 2017). These methods are effective in exploring how people experience situations and problems, giving voice to the lived experience of autistic individuals and stakeholders (Milton, 2014; Solomon & Bagatell, 2010; van Schalkwyk & Dewinter, 2020). The need for the use of qualitative studies in autism research has been stressed to describe a richer perspective into the lived experience of autistic individuals and the people around them (Bolte, 2014; Milton, 2014). Qualitative methods are informative in the current study as its focus is on the relatively unknown and underexplored area of employment and work for graduate autistic women (Cheriyana et al., 2021; Dewinter et al. 2015; George & Stokes 2018; Goldfarb et al., 2023; Lucas, Cage & James, 2022; Nicholas et al., 2018; Solomon & Bagatell, 2010; Vincent, 2020; Pesonen et al., 2022; Warner et al., 2019). Such methods have the potential to deepen our understanding and to amplify the voices of those considered to be the real experts on their experiences, i.e., autistic women (Crane et al., 2020; Milton, 2014; O'Neill, 2020; Ryan, 2013). It provides an opportunity for the voices of the women to be heard using a narrative inquiry approach to their stories, allowing unique insights into their experiences thereby creating “a larger vision of autism” (Chamak et al., 2008, p. 277), by facilitating the researcher to seek for patterns of meaning and experience while also accommodating differences across the data set, allowing for multiple realities to be reflected in the final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In these ways, a qualitative approach will ensure that the research question can be effectively addressed.

3.5 Narrative Inquiry

3.5.1 Narrative Inquiry as a Methodological Approach

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology which evolved from its origins in sociology and anthropology in the early 20th century (Cortazzi, 1994; Pitre et al., 2013; Wang & Geale, 2015). It is a methodology in which experience is the beginning and end point of inquiry (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) and unlike other research that starts with theory, narrative inquiry commences with experience. It has an underlying philosophy that enables the illumination of real people in real settings through the ‘painting’ of their stories (Wang &

Geale, 2015, pp.195) and as a methodology, it attempts to illuminate the meanings of personal stories, events, and experiences, which acts as a source of knowledge in and of itself, that warrants deeper understanding (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003).

Narrative research has many forms, uses a variety of analytic practices, and is rooted in different social and humanities disciplines (Chase, 2011; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 2012). Narrative inquiry as a methodology has expanded rapidly as researchers have shown an increasing interest in documenting and understanding the discursive complexity of individuals and group stories, which has been referred to as the 'narrative turn' (Czarniawska, 2004; Herman et al., 2005; Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008). Chase (2005) acclaims that narrative inquiry was first used by Chicago School sociologists who collected life histories in the 1920s and 30s, however, it was not until the late 1960's that narrative inquiry emerged as a growing method, with narrative inquiry research penetrating almost every discipline (Chase, 2011; Lai, 2010). This burgeoning was in part due to the liberation movements, such as the civil rights and feminist movements, where the voices and stories of segregated and marginalised groups were explored (Chase, 2011). There was a pivotal shift away from realism for many researchers (Chase, 2011) and this created the space for the use of a narrative approach, whereby matters of context, interactions, intersubjectivity, language and power in the research relationship started to come to the fore (Chase, 2011; Riessman, 2008).

Narrative inquiry is based on the foundation that as human beings we come to understand our lives and experiences in narrative form, we create stories and narratives to make sense, and to make meaning (Andrews et al., 2008; Chase 2011; Polkinghorne, 1988). Polkinghorne (1988) defines the most inclusive meaning of narrative as that which "refers to any spoken or written presentation" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 13). Narrative inquiry has a strong grounding in a social constructionist epistemology and takes as its objective the investigation of the story itself (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2012). It seeks to explore the lives of people by collecting and gathering their narratives through various data

gathering techniques (written, oral and visual) and then interpreting those narratives in context (Creswell, 2013).

Individuals live out storied lives; they tell stories of their experiences and modify them by retelling and reliving them to understand life experiences, connecting events in the manner of a plot that has beginning, middle, and end points (Smith & Sparkes, 2006; Souto-Manning, 2014). Humans are inextricably linked with the generation of narratives and create meaning and knowledge in society (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Huber et al., 2013; Polkinghorne, 1988). These stories are embedded within historical, structural, and ideological contexts, social discourses, and power relations (Pitre & Raine, 2013). Cobley (2001) observes that wherever there are human beings there are always stories, while Fulford (1999) notes that stories are how we explain, how we teach, how we entertain ourselves, and how we often do all three at once. The subject matter of narrative is the “vicissitudes of human intentions” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.17), the changing directions and goals of human storytelling. People craft narratives, constructing and representing the self (Bamberg, 2011). Through the telling of their story, who they were in the past, who they presently are and where they envisage themselves in their future, consciously and unconsciously revealing aspects of their identity (Bamberg, 2011). Personal stories are particularly valuable when told for research purposes as they “reveal how life events affect people and how people give meaning to these events” (Minichiello et al., 1999, p. 134). Each narrative is important and unique, prioritising for individuality but still allowing for exploration of comparison, similarities and connections made between the stories of others (Josselson, 2011).

In this way, a narrative inquiry approach focuses on the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences seeking to provide “insight that (befits) the complexity of human lives” (Josselson, 2006, p.4), enabling researchers to understand and make sense of lived experience (Gumbrium & Holstein, 2009; Josselson, 2011). Thus, a narrative inquiry approach is fundamentally suited to an exploration of experiences of autistic graduate women in navigating the world of work.

3.5.2 Situating the Study within Narrative Inquiry

The longstanding silencing of autistic women (Gemma, 2021; Holliday Willey, 2015; Milton & Bracher, 2013), together with a dearth of research representing their experiences in employment (Hayward et al., 2019; Tint & Weiss, 2018), and in their transition from higher education (Pesonen et al., 2021; Vincent, 2020; Vincent & Fabri, 2020) indicates the need for a study of this nature. It is anticipated that this study has the potential to broaden our understanding of autistic graduate women's experiences particularly within the context of work. A narrative inquiry approach, with its focus on lived experience (Kramp, 2004) and meaning making through the process of narrating a story (Bonsall, 2012), provided a framework and tools to explore the work experiences and stories from autistic women. According to Elliot (2005), supporting the women to provide their narrative accounts of their lives and experiences can help to provide evidence about their everyday lives and the meanings they attach to their experiences. Narrative inquiry was deemed to be a suitable approach to support the exploration of personal perspectives, as it allows for the gathering of richly detailed data with an ultimate focus on understanding, (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in which participants are encouraged to "speak in their own voices" (Mishler, 1986, as cited in King & Horrocks, 2010). Therefore, by using a narrative inquiry approach, the voices and perspectives of the women were prioritised. The women are recognised as 'the experts' of their own lives (Lory, 2018; Milton, 2014; O'Neill 2020, Stark et al., 2020). Their voices and perspectives inductively drove the unfolding of their stories, providing for a fuller understanding of how they made sense of their worlds and the work experiences they encountered. The women could tell their story in whatever manner they felt comfortable and used their own words to express their own values and thoughts (Posavac & Carey, 1997). The power of narrative reassigns autistic women the opportunity to story their own identity and experiences (Smith-Chandler & Swart, 2014). In narrative inquiry, the researcher gathers the stories and shapes the stories through analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995), by searching for common and disparate ideas, themes metaphors and plotlines, to identify general themes and concepts (Clandinin, 2006), specifically the analysis of narratives which will be presented within the data analysis section of the chapter (section 3.9).

3.6 Research Design

Figure 3.1 provides an outline of the overall research process. The subsequent sections describe the criteria for the recruitment of participants, the recruitment process, piloting of the interview tool, the establishment and consultation with a reference group for the study, the data collection process, ethical considerations and will also discuss and explore the considerations and actions undertaken by the researcher in conducting the research.

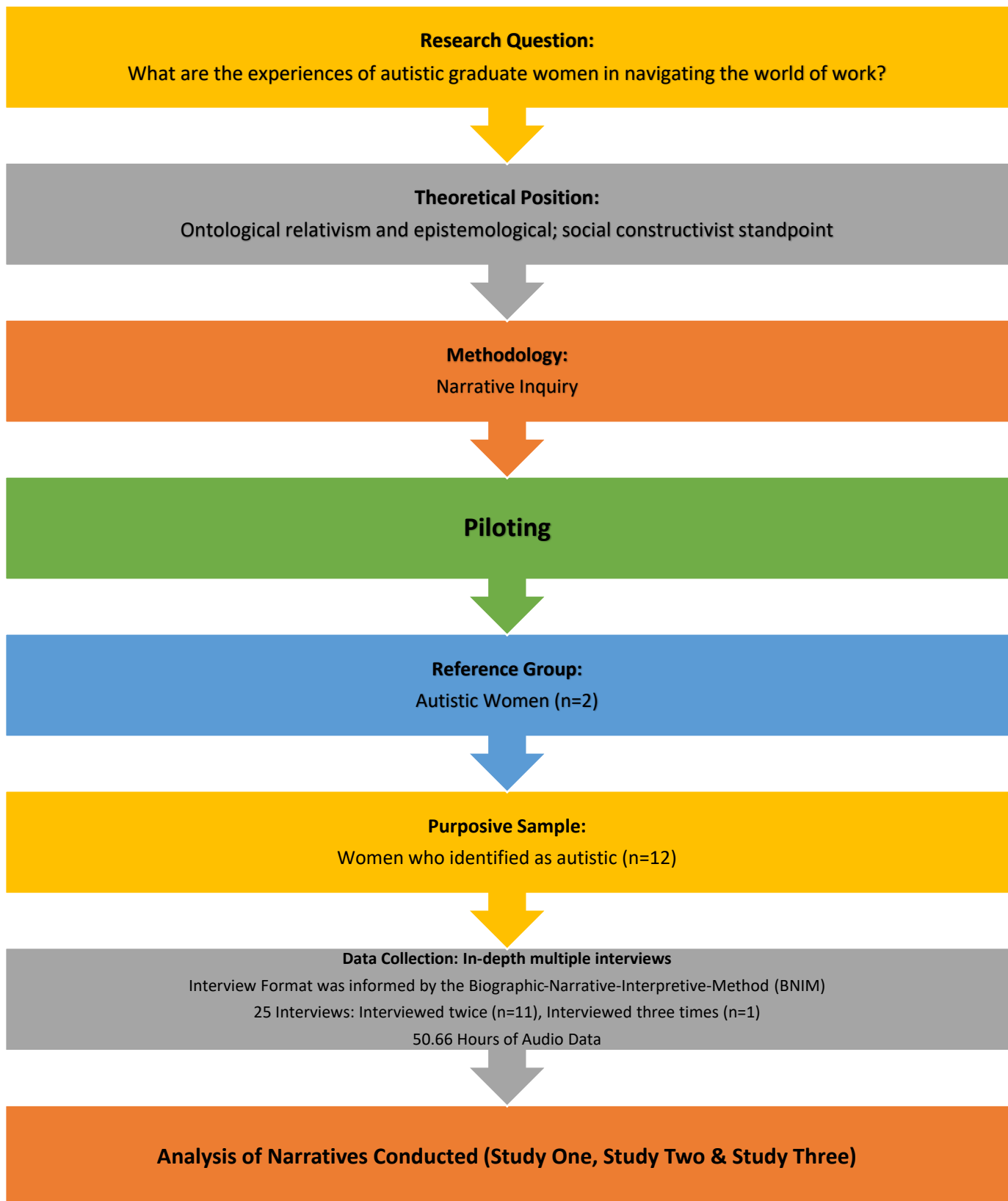


Figure 3.1 The Research Process

3.6.1 Study Participants

3.6.1.1 *Sample Inclusion Criteria*

Sampling decisions were based on a critical examination of the empirical and theoretical literature to date, combined with the practical considerations of conducting doctoral research (Bryman, 2012; Morse 2000; Patton, 2002). Given that the success of a narrative inquiry study depends on being able to gather and access rich material (Josephsson & Alasker, 2015; Wengraf, 2001), it was necessary to invite information-rich participants that were willing to proactively contribute (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Bryman, 2012; Josephsson & Alasker, 2015; Patton, 2014) and who were willing to participate in two interviews with an interval of one month between the first and second interview. Therefore, the sampling strategy (Moser & Korstjens, 2017; Polkinghorne, 2005) employed for this study was purposive sampling (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Bryman, 2012; Merriam, 2009). In addition to purposive sampling, snowball sampling was also used (Bryman, 2012; Waters, 2015). This term refers to recruiting additional participants through recommendations and introduction by others (Robinson, 2014). Snowball sampling can be particularly useful when reaching hard to access populations (Robinson, 2014), such as autistic women (Gemma, 2021).

The autistic community has highlighted that autistic people themselves are experts on their own lives (Grandin, 1986; Milton, 2014; O'Neill, 2020) and that research conducted from this perspective has the potential to be emancipatory and empowering (Smith-Chandler & Swart, 2014). There has recently been increasing calls for more research to be conducted exploring the experiences of autistic individuals, but little actual work has been conducted to date (Murray et al., 2023). It was with this in mind, and the fact that women's experiences were most valued, that only interviews with autistic graduate women themselves were included in this study. This study was most concerned with the views and experiences of autistic graduate women, while also recognising that the perspectives of autistic women who have not attended higher education is also incredibly valuable. I was purposefully interested in this sample given that this was a group of women that I had

previously worked with and had through my engagement with the autistic community understood by listening to their experiences that despite having attended higher education were experiencing barriers in navigating the world of work post-graduation. On further examination of the literature and research as detailed in the literature review, there is a dearth of research and understanding about the experiences of autistic women and their work experiences generally (Bargiela et al., 2016; Cook & Garnett, 2018; Hayward et al., 2018b; Leedham et al., 2020; Nagib & Wilton, 2020; Taylor & DaWalt, 2020) and even less so about autistic women who have attended and successfully graduated from higher education (Raymaker et al., 2023). It is against this backdrop, that only autistic women who had attended higher education were included in this study as this was an evident gap in the literature.

The Inclusion Criteria for the study were as follows:

- Individuals who identified as being a woman.
- Individuals with either an official diagnosis of autism or who self-identified as being autistic.
- Individuals over eighteen years of age and who had either started, withdrawn or completed a university/college/third-level education degree/course within the past ten years.
- Individuals living in Ireland at the time of the study.

3.6.1.2 Considerations regarding the number of participants for recruitment into the study

The number of participants in qualitative research is an area of conceptual debate and practical uncertainty (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Patton (2002) states that “there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 244), with the number of participants varying according to the different research designs employed (Beitin, 2012). Despite the substantial variation in published opinion and literature related to sample size in qualitative research in general, there is also great variation specifically in narrative methods (Guetterman, 2015; Ulfseth et al., 2015). Qualitative research experts contend

that there is no direct answer to the question of 'how many' and that sample size depends on multiple factors relating to epistemological, methodological, and practical issues (Merriam, 2009; Moser & Korstjens, 2017; Sandelowski, 1995). Although, the term saturation is the commonly used concept that drives the question of sample size in qualitative studies (Moser & Korstjens, 2017), it is more closely aligned with the positivist approach to research where a single truth is inferred (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Saturation refers to the terms of 'data' or 'thematic' saturation and has developed. Within the qualitative domain, it has its origins in grounded theory but has been used by several qualitative communities (Bowen, 2008). Saturation, as noted by Marshall et al. (2013) and Guest et al. (2006) refers to the point in time when the collection of new qualitative data no longer changes or changes little and is the point at which the performance of research declines. Various researchers caution that saturation is less applicable to, or appropriate for different types of qualitative research, whilst others reject the concept altogether (Nelson, 2017). Patton (2002) instead suggests that the sample size should be dependent on what the study is about, what is useful, the resources and the amount of time that the researcher has, to conduct the research (Patton, 2002). Sandelowski (1995) advocates that qualitative sample sizes should be large enough to allow the unfolding of a "new and richly textured understanding" of the phenomenon under study, but small enough so that the "deep, case-oriented analysis" (p. 183) of qualitative data is not excluded.

Morse (2000) theorises that the more useable data collected from each person, the fewer participants are required. She calls on researchers to take into account parameters, such as the scope of study, the nature of the topic (i.e., complexity, accessibility), the quality of data, and the study design in determining the size (Morse, 2000). In a review of sample sizes in qualitative research, Guetterman (2015) found that sample sizes in narrative inquiry ranged from one to twenty-four in research related to education, while the sample size ranged from one to fifty-two in research within the health sciences.

Previous doctoral research further sheds light on the number of participants employed in other narrative studies, which employed similar research designs to this doctoral study.

Kanfiszer et al., (2017) had a sample of seven autistic women in her narrative inquiry study which sought to explore the experiences of women diagnosed as autistic in adulthood in relation to gender and social relationships. This mirrors a similar sample size in a narrative study conducted by Krieger et al (2012) which interviewed six autistic adults twice within a time span of four weeks. While Peta (2017), used a qualitative narrative approach to explore the experiences of sexuality of disabled women in Zimbabwe. Sixteen women were recruited into the study, and she used an analysis of narratives to analyse the interviews conducted with each of the women. While Flynn and McGregor (2018), recruited eleven participants in a narrative study, which investigated how intellectually disabled young people, and their families, experienced the economic downturn in Ireland. A review of 560 doctoral thesis using qualitative interview data conducted by Mason (2010), found that the mean number of single interviews completed for qualitative studies was 31. He did not specifically identify numbers where participants were interviewed more than once. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) analysed 60 interviews and found that saturation of themes was reached by the twelfth interview.

Determining sample sizes in qualitative studies may never be possible given the significant variation within qualitative projects (Merriam, 2009; Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Consistent with the methodological approach and evidence from empirical literature on sample sizes, a sample size of twelve participants, completing multiple interviews was deemed to be an adequate and appropriate sample size for the purposes of a narrative doctoral research study, given that autistic adults are described as being excluded and least heard people in society, thus the women's voice and experience were placed at the centre to build an understanding of their experiences (Kanfiszer, 2017; Morse, 2000; Wengraf, 2001).

3.7 Data Gathering Methods

3.7.1 Interviewing within a Narrative Inquiry Methodology

Narrative within qualitative research is synonymous with verbal data, generated and gathered through interviews (Chase, 2011; Hiles & Cermak, 2008). Verbal data within narrative inquiry must be storied and this can be gathered using in-depth interviews (Chase, 2011; Riessman, 2008; Trahar, 2009; Wengraf, 2001). Within a narrative interview, both the researcher and the participant are present in the telling of the story. In this manner, the story is a social construction with the story “produced in this particular setting, for this particular audience, for these particular purposes” (Chase, 2008, p. 65). Utilising in-depth interviews as an approach within narrative inquiry was deemed to be the best method for addressing the research question, as it allowed the voice and the deep experiences of the women to be heard (Grbich, 2004).

3.7.2 Choosing Multiple In-depth Interviews as a Method for Data Collection

I set out to find a method of narrative interviewing that could be tailored to address the research question and aims, and to also support and enable the research participants to share their experiences. I chose to conduct two interviews with each participant with an interval of one month between interview one and interview two. The first interview utilised an open interview format, while the second interview which was informed and guided by the first interview utilised a semi-structured nature. My goal was two-fold; to build a rapport with the participants, as well as reach depth in the interviews to explore and build a better understanding of their experiences and stories in relation to work.

Clarke (2003) describes the use of more than one interview as an important part for establishing rapport within the research. Furthermore, each interviewing relationship is individually crafted and having the opportunity to establish rapport over two interviews enhances the opportunity to do so (Seidman, 2006). Holloway and Jefferson (2000) state

that because the narrative approach to interviewing differs from the standard closed question style interview, it can take time to build up a participant's confidence in the telling of their stories. I was aware from my professional experience that it can often take time for autistic women to establish rapport with a person and to build trust in the relationship. Most of these women had never met with me prior to the research and therefore rapport building was essential to establish comfort within the research relationship, so that the women felt more at ease and were open in sharing their personal experiences. From the outset of each relationship with each participant, I worked conscientiously to create a transparent and honest relationship with each of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022). By meeting with the women twice (three times on one occasion, with one participant, due to the second interview having to end early for the participant's personal commitments), the women had the opportunity to broach experiences at their own pace. It was evident that the women appeared more at ease with me at the second interview. For example, one of the participants felt that she could raise more personal experiences in her second interview, and she detailed and described this when she was reflecting on her participation in the research process.

Conducting more than one interview was also deemed an appropriate method to ensure depth. Depth within the interviews was vital to truly explore and obtain information about how the women made sense of their work experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). A period of approximately one month between interview one and interview two was provided for the women to reflect and consider their work experiences (Seidman, 2006). During the interviews, the women discussed how they had never had the opportunity to speak about and tell their stories and share their experiences as an autistic woman and even more so within the context of work. This period offered them the time to think about this and delve into further topics in the second interview. Furthermore, the women were advised that there was no time limit on each interview, offering them the opportunity to share as much of their experiences and stories as they liked.

By conducting two or more interviews with each of the participants, there was an opportunity for me to preliminary analyse the data from the first interview. This presented the additional benefit to identify topics raised in the first interview for further discussion with each of the women in the second interview. Smith (2013) advises that by completing qualitative interviewing in this way, offers the opportunity for richer data to be gathered, which in turn allows for more credible and potentially complex understanding of participants' experiences and lives. The in-depth interviewing method chosen is discussed in the next section.

3.7.3 The In-depth Interviewing Method Utilised

Chase (2011) identifies that there are many different approaches to conducting in-depth interviews within a narrative inquiry method. While the Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was not wholly adopted by this study, the interviews conducted in the study were influenced by concepts borrowed from this approach (Wengraf, 2001; 2019). This interviewing method is predominantly an open narrative interview process, which involves three specific components. The initial interview is characterised by a period of main narration, whereby the narration is prompted by a 'Single Question Aimed at Inducing Narrative' (SQUIN) (Corbally & O'Neill, 2014; Wengraf, 2013). The interviewer does not intervene and allows the interviewee to share their thoughts and stories. This is then followed by a period of internal questioning, where questions posed are based on topics raised in the first part of the interview, where the main narration took place. Finally, a second interview then follows which allows for topics raised in the first interview to be re-explored and further discussed and then allows for a period of external questioning, where the researcher brings up topics that have not already been discussed in the previous interview, typically following a semi-structured interview, based on addressing the research question (Wengraf, 2001).

The single narrative open question at the beginning of the first interview, offered the participants the opportunity to share their unique story with the freedom to choose which

areas of their work experiences and lives they wished to focus on (Corbally & O'Neill, 2014). This method of in-depth interviewing offers an exploration of the subjective experiences of the women to enrich our understanding of them (Chamberlayne & King, 2000). The researcher becomes the passive listener, and the participant shares their unique story (Freeman, 1993). An open approach to interviewing empowers the participants to share their stories (Hesketh, 2014; Wengraf, 2001) and offers freer responses (Mishler, 1986). The data collection stage will be discussed in detail in section 3.7.9.

3.7.4 Utilisation of Objects as a Method for Elicitation

The women were also invited to choose an object that represented their experience of work as an autistic graduate woman. The women were invited to bring/show these objects at the second interview to support them in telling their work story. The objects were seen as props to elicit and assist the women in telling their story helping them to express their experiences and voice, offering the opportunity for further depth and experience to be explored within the second interview (Sheridan & Chamberlain, 2011; Willis & Cromby, 2020). Material objects are props within the environment. They can be made, bought, collected and acquired or given or received as presents (Sheridan & Chamberlain, 2011). Objects and props can be a representation of the self, as they reflect personal tastes and personal principles and values (Miller, 1987). Objects such as photos can hold value and represent experiences (Morgan & Pritchard, 2005). The use of objects to aid the production of verbal data and for research is not new (Collier, 1957). The use of an object as a prop in research has been gaining increasing attention within the literature as they are becoming increasingly popular and widely used to elicit and enrich narratives, tell stories, and depict life and experiences (Riessman, 2008). Objects have included the use of paintings and letters (Tamboukou, 2008), personal objects within one's home (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981), as well as Lego (Gauntlett, 2007). Objects have the power to hold relevance for the interviewee and participants and can facilitate narratives to be enriched and developed (Sheridan & Chamberlain, 2011). The addition of objects to assist the representation of experience can be useful and can afford a more nuanced expression of

experiences (Pink, 2004). It was intended that it would aid and support the women in the telling of their story during the interview process. The decision to include the use of objects within the interview process to purely elicit further narratives of experience was prompted based on the researcher's experience with the autistic community.

3.7.5 Piloting

Piloting is seen as a crucial step in carrying out qualitative research (Majid et al., 2017). Given that the researcher was utilising interviews to gather the women's experiences and stories, it was essential to pilot the interview format. Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2003) believe that the interviewer is an "instrument" (p. 418) when gathering interview data, and stress the importance for researchers, using interviewing as a method, to spend time engaging in the interview process. Piloting can provide unique opportunities to improve the skills of a qualitative researcher in conducting interviews including the opportunity to interact and engage with participants, review an appropriate venue, conduct in-depth interviewing, and to establish opportunities for probing, developing topics in the interview process (Nunes et al., 2010). Piloting supports the interviewer to be reflexive in their approach and consequently can enhance the credibility of the research (Padgett, 2008).

Piloting was employed in this study to:

1. Explore the use of the narrative interview data collection method. I wanted to identify whether the narrative inducing question was effective as a means of data collection with the piloting participants.
2. Up-skill in the narrative interview technique, to maximise the quality of the research study.
3. Provide an opportunity to experience the practical aspects of data collection such as using the audio recorder and managing the consent process.
4. To further identify potential guiding questions and topics for probing within the second interview.

With ethical approval gained (see section 3.8), the first interview was piloted with two autistic women, who provided informed consent to participate. The women were met at a time and place of their convenience, this included a coffee shop, and a room within the university in which the researcher was studying. During each interview, I collated notes related to the interview, identifying, and noting key topics which were emerging from the stories that the women were telling. Post interview, reflections on the interview process were captured in my reflective journal, which was later used for discussion with my supervisors during supervision sessions. The piloting interviews lasted approximately one and half hours, and were audio recorded. A review of the interview transcripts was conducted and specific areas relating to the world of work were identified which warranted further exploration. Several learning points were drawn from the piloting of the interviews. Some of these points are summarised and listed below:

- *Narrative Inducing Question:* The original narrative inducing question required refinement and change as it was deemed too broad and lengthy and difficult for the women to remember. Therefore, the narrative inducing question was adapted as a result.
- *Introduction of an Object as a Prop:* Piloting confirmed that inviting participants to bring an object could likely support the women in their story telling.
- *Interview Process:* I became more aware of my approach during the interview process, in particular my body language and my response and engagement with the participants.
- *Probing Questions:* Probing topics and questions were identified for further exploration in the second interview.
- *Practicalities:* I identified several practical issues, some of these included the need for a backup audio-recorder, and the position of the audio-recorder. I also became aware that a de-brief procedure was required with each participant at the end of the interview, to ensure that the women were aware of supports if they felt they needed it. I also acknowledged the importance of allowing myself time for rest and reflection after the interviews.

Another learning output from conducting the piloting of the interviews, suggested the need for consulting with a Reference Group to further inform the study and the research design and this will be discussed in the next section.

3.7.6 Consulting a Reference Group

Piloting highlighted the need to consult further with a reference group to not only inform the further design of the study but to inform practical ways to support how the study was conducted with members of the autistic community, given that I am a non-autistic researcher. It also sought to explore whether a research study of this nature was warranted from an Irish perspective. Autism literature highlights the growing concern about a disconnect between researchers and the autistic community (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Chown et al., 2017; Kapp, 2020; Milton, 2014; Woods & Waltz, 2019). One of the big concerns, relates to the autistic community's level of engagement and participation with research studies. Many autistic academics and advocates (Chown et al., 2017; Kapp, 2020; Milton, 2014; Milton & Bracher, 2013; Woods & Waltz, 2019) have identified the need to engage and consult with the autistic community when conducting autism research. A seminar series which investigated how autism research is conducted titled, *Shaping Autism in Research* suggested that reference and advisory groups can facilitate the involvement of autistic communities in the research process (Pellicano et al., 2017). It has also been proposed that involving the autistic community in the research process is an important element to strengthen the research design and to contextualise research in terms of real-world meaning (Chown et al., 2017; Grinker et al., 2012; Milton & Bracher, 2013; Walmsley et al., 2018; Woods & Waltz, 2019). Collaborative ways of working can improve the quality, relevance, and impact of the resulting research (Forsythe et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop a reference group was established for the study. Two autistic women who were actively involved as leaders and advocates within the autistic community in Ireland volunteered to act as informants.

The Reference Group aimed to:

- Explore the relevance of the research to the autistic community and explore whether the research and the research method were acceptable, credited, warranted, and required.
- Provide advice in relation to the research design and research process.
- Provide further feedback on the research information poster.
- To assist in determining avenues of dissemination for the call for participants.
- Provide advice on the language that should be used within the research.
- Feedback on their perspectives of the findings.

The informants were met individually both face-to-face and online over the course of the study. During these exchanges the informants offered complementary expertise and provided feedback on the practicalities of engaging with the autistic community. I maintained a reflective diary, including notes and reflections of the points raised. The advice and comments collected had an informative purpose only and were not used as research data.

Several important outcomes from meeting with the informants were identified, these included:

- The informants indicated and confirmed that work for autistic women was an area that warranted further investigation.
- The informants approved the study design and methods employed and appreciated the open style of interviewing and how this supported the future participants to share their story as they wished to tell it.
- They recommended that the participants would benefit from receiving the narrative inducing question prior to the scheduled first interview and suggested that this be sent in the preferred method of communication identified by the participant. It was proposed that this would allow the women the opportunity to prepare and consider their own experiences and stories before they shared them with the researcher and may support the participants to prepare in advance of the interview process.

- The informants approved the potential use of the prop as a way that could support the women in the telling of their story and saw it as a novel approach.
- The informants advised of the language being used within the autistic community and proposed that I ask each woman who participates in the study how they would like to be referred to.

The suggestions put forward by the informants were considered and many of them were included and employed in the research design.

The Reference Group were also consulted on the findings of the research study.

3.7.7 Recruitment of Participants

Several methods were used to recruit the sample. Firstly, I contacted Irish autism charities, and organisations informing them of the study and its aims, including AsIAm, The Autism Spectrum Association of Ireland, Irish Society for Autism, and Specialisterne (Appendix G). These organisations were asked to act as gatekeeper by either posting an information brochure (Appendix H) on their website and their social media pages which outlined details of the study or by informing members on their database about the study through the dissemination of the participant information leaflet (Appendix E). Any interested participants were asked to contact me directly via email, text, or voice call. Secondly, the Irish autistic community have a very strong online presence, where autistic communities have been established through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. These communities were also contacted requesting them to act as gatekeeper. They agreed to do so, and they posted the information brochure which detailed the study on their social media pages (Appendix H). They also retweeted a Twitter page which was set up to house information about the current study. Participants were again advised to contact me directly via email, phone, or text message. Self-selecting participants were emailed / posted a copy of the participant information leaflet and the consent form for consideration and clarification of the study and its aims and involvement (Appendix E and F).

Snowball sampling also occurred using the social media medium (Bryman, 2012; Waters, 2015). This method of sampling and recruitment is deemed to be useful in recruiting populations that are deemed to be hard to reach and hidden (Waters, 2015). Furthermore, using this form of virtual sampling can increase the sample size and support data collection (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). Reaching out via the online autistic communities and via the Twitter page generated the most interest in the research. Nine participants were recruited via these routes.

A further three women were aware of the research study through my connections within the autistic community and contacted me directly to find out more about the study. They were forwarded a copy of the participant information leaflet and consent form prior to agreeing to participate.

All participants who met the study inclusion criteria were included in the study. Twelve participants were recruited for this study, and they engaged in two interviews conducted one month apart. The sample size was balanced against the pragmatic boundaries set out by the nature of a doctoral research project including limits on time, it was also influenced by the fact that autistic women are deemed to be a hidden group within Ireland, most of whom receive a late diagnosis, thus influencing the potential sample population. The sample size was therefore deemed acceptable to gain an understanding of their experiences of work as autistic graduate women within an Irish context, an area of study which has not been attempted thus far.

[3.7.8 Changes in Data Gathering as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic - Virtual Interviewing](#)

The data gathering stage of this study commenced in February 2020, and all interviews were planned to be conducted face-to-face with the twelve women at a time and place of convenience to them. Three women were interviewed face-to-face between late February and early March 2020. However, the international Covid-19 pandemic struck, and essential

changes and practical steps were required to modify and continue with the study, given the public health directives and the national lockdown employed (Pocock et al., 2021). Like many other researchers internationally, a move to synchronous online, virtual, audio-visual platforms was deemed to be the best option in replicating traditional in person interviews (Wilkerson et al., 2014). This enabled me the opportunity to conduct rigorous research while aligning with public health directives and guidelines (Dodds & Hess, 2021). It was necessary to move from face-to-face interviews to online virtual interviews with the women and ethical amendments, were required to carry this out (Appendix D). All further interviews, including the second interviews with the three participants who had been previously interviewed face-to-face were completed virtually. See table 3.1 for the methods used with each participant, pseudonyms utilised.

Participant	Interview 1: Part One and Part Two (SS1 & SS2)	Interview 2: SS3
Sally	Face-to-Face in Person	Online via webcam
Judith	Face-to-Face in Person	Online via webcam
Grace	Face-to-Face in Person	Online via webcam
Jenny	Online via webcam	Online via webcam
Angela	Online via webcam	Online via webcam (over two occasions- due to the second interview having to be terminated early owing to personal commitments)
Leah	Online via webcam	Online via webcam
Martha	Online via webcam	Online via webcam
Alex	Online via webcam	Online via webcam
Brid	Telephone	Online via webcam
Martina	Online via webcam	Online via webcam
Ciara	Online via webcam	Online via webcam
Sarah	Online via webcam	Online via webcam

Table 3.1 Format of Interviews

Although, Covid forced the change to virtual interviewing, interest in virtual qualitative research has readily developed over the past decade (Davies et al., 2020) and good practice

guidelines have been established to support research utilising this method. I reviewed the literature in this area and implemented several steps to support virtual interviewing, these included:

- I upskilled in the various technologies to conduct interviews online and I referred to the university recommendations around the use of technology in upholding data protection. Consideration around the technology available to the participants (Morrison et al., 2020; Wilkerson et al., 2014) was explored individually with each woman prior to each interview.
- I conducted several practice sessions to ensure digital literacy with the audio-visual platforms being used (Marhefka et al., 2020).
- I established procedures and guidelines in relation to upholding privacy and confidentiality, as well as maintaining professionalism e.g., ensuring that I was alone in the room when the interview was conducted with no listeners near, I wore professional attire, and a professional virtual backdrop was used. The participants were informed of these procedures at the outset of the interviews.
- I utilised two devices for recording the interviews and the participants were advised when the recordings were being commenced and stopped.

3.7.9 Data Collection: Conducting the Interviews

As discussed in section 3.7.2 and 3.7.3, in-depth multiple interviews together with the use of a prop/object to further elicit experiences were utilised as the methods for collecting data. Two interviews were conducted with each of the women (three interviews were conducted with one woman; Angela as the second interview had to be terminated early owing to personal commitments), with each interview taking place approximately one month apart. The data collection period commenced in late February 2020 and ceased in early December 2020. The interview process is depicted in figure 3.2 below.

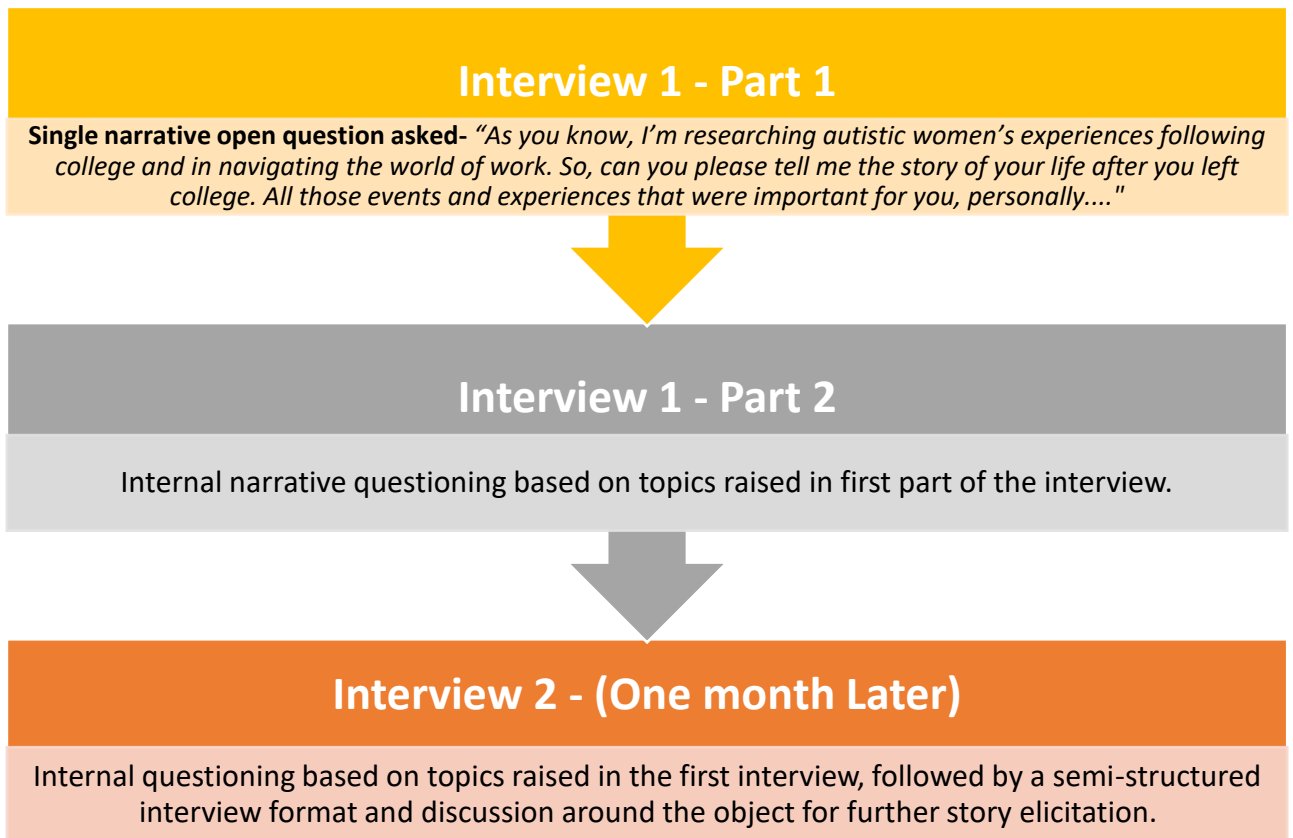


Figure 3.2 The Interview Process

Prior to the interviews, contact was made with all participants either via email or by telephone (their preferred method of initial communication). This contact offered an opportunity for me to introduce myself and to answer any questions that the participants had about the study, which may have arisen from the participant information leaflet sent ahead of time. During the email exchange or telephone call, arrangements for the first interview were scheduled, either to decide on a location in which to meet for the face-to-face interviews (for the first three participants) or to ascertain the online platform that was accessible and available for the participants who were sharing their story virtually (further considerations taken are explained in section 3.7.11). Written consent was obtained prior to the interview process. In addition, oral consent was also revisited at the outset of each of the interviews and when sensitive issues were discussed during the interviews (See section 3.8.2 on participant consent).

3.7.9.1 Interview One

With the focus of the study on autistic graduate women and their work experiences, the single narrative open question focused on exploring the women's stories of work. The question was sent to all participants prior to the first interview taking place to allow the women to consider and gather their thoughts in line with the recommendations provided by the reference group. This question was then poised to the women as the general prompt at the outset of the first interview:

"As you know, I'm researching autistic women's experiences following college and in navigating the world of work. So, can you please tell me the story of your life after you left college. All those events and experiences that were important for you, personally. Start whenever you like. Please take your time. I'll listen, I won't interrupt. I'll just take some notes in case I have any questions for after you've finished."

This open-ended question allowed the participants the opportunity to choose which areas they wished to focus on and the experiences they wished to share and describe, in relation to the question presented (Corbally & O'Neill, 2014). Instilling the opportunity for the participants to decide on the topics they wished to raise in this first part of the interview, this also aimed to support the women to develop a sense of comfort within the research relationship. During this first part of the first interview, I was an active listener (Wengraf, 2001), listening attentively to the women's experience, without any interjections or interruptions to allow the participants' stream of narrative. The minimalist interjection was limited to non-verbal communicative support and facilitative noises. I also maintained notes on topics to raise for the second part of the first interview for internal narrative questioning (Corbally & O'Neill, 2014). I considered that the women may find this method of open questioning with no interjections difficult, however the women narrated their story at ease; I perceived that I may have been required to support and interject, repeating the question or by providing verbal prompts, however this was minimal across all twelve of the interviews.

The initial narration continued until the interviewee indicated clearly that they had no more to say. It was imperative that I did not interject into silences and pauses to prevent prematurely interfering with, or ceasing, their main narration (Wengraf, 2001; 2019). I was

particularly judicious in this regard given that the interviews were conducted online with the potential for technical and connection issues being misinterpreted as the end of the narration. The women narrated in length varying from twenty-one minutes, up to one-hour and twenty plus minutes.

Once the main narration ceased, a short interlude of fifteen minutes was taken. For the women who were interviewed face-to-face, they tended to take some refreshments or take a short break outside of the interview room. Most of the participants who were interviewed online, tended to turn off their camera and sound, and took some time for refreshments and a short break.

During this period, I examined the notes taken in the first part of the interview and formulated several internal narrative questions, which were generated from the participants responses in the first part of the interview. The principle in the second section of the first interview is to only ask questions about experiences and points that were raised in the first part of the interview, in the order in which they were raised and using the words that were used by the women themselves (Wengraf, 2001; 2019). No other topic or questions were raised in this section. Therefore, the format of the second part of the interview was formulated by the women themselves, hence the questions arose from the women’s narrative provided in the first part of the interview and no external questioning was introduced. Some examples of the questions posed in the second part of the first interview are presented in table 3.2 below:

<i>“You said you ‘struggled with the basics of interview.’ Do you remember any more about those particular incidents and all that happened within them?”</i>
<i>“You said you ‘didn’t fit in’. Can you tell me more about this?”</i>
<i>“You said ‘as a woman you’re expected to wear makeup’. Do you have any feelings about that?”</i>
<i>“Can you tell me more about your current job?”</i>

Table 3.2 Example of Internal Questions asked during the second part of the first interview

The internal questioning phase followed the process in which the topics and experiences were raised by the women, thus following their gestalt (Wengraf, 2001; 2019). In asking the internal questions, I was able to use the words that the women used in the first part of their interview (See examples in Table 3.2), to support their recall and to elicit more detail about their experiences. In this way the women build on their story. The internal questioning did not only solicit further rich data, but also embedded a feedback process with the women and ensured clarification and accuracy could be sought about an event, further ensuring a narrative accuracy check, as a form of member checking (Stanley, 2011). The second section of the first interview also enabled the women to realise that they were being listened to carefully and considerately, and that their experiences were being explored. Finally, at the end of interview one, all participants were asked if there was anything else they wished to add to their story. The participants were also invited to bring an object/prop that represented their experience of work to further support them in sharing their story to the second interview.

3.7.9.2 Moving from Interview One to Interview Two- Preliminary Analysis -Preparing for Interview Two

A preliminary analysis and consideration of each of the women's narratives took place after completion of each of the first interviews with the women in preparation for the second interview and to develop an interview guide for interview two (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Krauss et al., 2009; McGrath et al., 2019). This preliminary analysis was conducted to determine areas which would benefit from further exploration and questioning with the women in the second interview, as well as an opportunity to clarify events, experiences, and perspectives. Furthermore, it also offered the opportunity to identify any areas that were not brought up by the women in the first interview and that were pertinent to the research question and the aims of the study and that related to relevant areas of literature in the area of autism and work.

Several steps were taken in conducting this preliminary analysis and are outlined in the sections below:

Familiarisation with the Data

The audio files from the first interview were transcribed by a professional transcriber (in line with ethical approval) for time efficiency and to allow me to review and conduct a preliminary initial analysis of the first interview. The transcripts were considered, whereby several methods were used to take note of early thoughts and ideas on the women's story and how that related to the research question. I used visual brainstorm bubbles to visually represent my thoughts (See Appendix J for an example) and documented initial thoughts using a Word document (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Developing a Timeline

Following this I then searched the first interview transcript for named chronological information. This included any mention of the women's age, as well as particular dates and specific time periods they identified, as well as events and experiences that the women mentioned across their stories. These events, and experiences described in the transcripts also known as the 'facts' of situations and experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2005), were then arranged chronologically (See Appendix I for an example). This supported me to build a better understanding of the women's work journey. Additionally, it afforded me the opportunity to identify experiences and events that were mentioned, that would benefit from further exploration in interview two, as well as exploring gaps in the narratives. The table below highlights an example of how the timeline supported me to identify areas for further exploration in interview two (See appendix I for an example).

Timeline identified gaps in understanding in relation to:	Identified Potential Areas to explore in Interview Two:
Time in college-mentions areas of study and being at college	Would benefit in exploring her experience of college in greater detail and explore what she studied.
Mentions working as 'specific post' in early working years	Explore more about her early work experiences and what this involved.

Table 3.3 Use of Timeline in identifying areas for further exploration

Identifying Initial Concepts

In reviewing the transcripts, I searched for broad topics and identified potential concepts which were central to the women's initial narrative. Identifying these initial concepts allowed me to consider whether these areas warranted further investigation in the second interview. An example of this is provided in table 3.4 below.

Identifying Initial Concepts	Identified Potential Areas to explore in Interview Two:
Concept - Patchwork: • Jenny has worked from an early age in supporting self. Describes her CV as a patchwork, with little or no direction or career. Work is seasonal/sessional- paying bills. Unknown why she got involved in education??? • Two degrees- reports feeling underemployed. • Wants to figure out a path for herself in terms of employment, but doesn't know where to go or what to do...	• Explore why she has chosen the path as an educator; this is different to past experiences. • What does she mean by being 'underemployed' from her perspective? Does this impact on her? • What does this mean for her? How does she plan on moving forward into the future?

Table 3.4 Identifying initial concepts and potential areas for questioning and exploration

Narrative Checks

In reviewing the transcripts, I also sought to identify areas that needed additional checks to verify the accuracy of the women's account of their experience. For example, Jenny mentioned in her first interview about taking "*four weeks off work to recover*". She did not elaborate on what this period of recovery was and therefore considering the format for the second interview, I was able to identify areas such as this that required narrative checks to seek clarification and verification of the women's experience and stories.

Exploring entries from Reflective Journal

In devising the interview guide for the second interview, I also reviewed my de-briefing notes from my reflective journal (which were written immediately following the first interview with each of the women). This allowed me to consider my initial reactions and thoughts following the interview and to identify and highlight areas that I considered important for follow up in the second interview. Examples of this are provided in Table 3. 5 titled: An example of questions guided by the researcher's reflexivity.

Extract from Reflective Journal	Questions guided by researcher reflexivity
Extract from Reflective Journal 27th February 2020 <i>"Sally has such a wealth of education and experiences; she appeared open to telling her story as she spoke for quite a length. At some points in sub-session one I felt a little weird, balancing trying not to interject, with the need to feel that I wanted to continue to build the rapport with her. In fairness, for her sub-session two worked well and she really took a chronological perspective in telling her story. There were points in her story that she brought up some issues that she experienced, such as developing mental health difficulties and considering suicide during her periods of unemployment. Being unemployed obviously had a significant impact on her personally, it shows how important work is for her in terms of her health and wellbeing. It is something to explore further in her next interview and I need to be sensitive to this topic as I broach it with her."</i>	<i>You discussed in your last interview about being unemployed for a long period of time, can you tell me more about that time for you?</i> <i>You mentioned during your first interview that you had some periods of unemployment in the past prior to having your current job, what would you say were the barriers for you in gaining employment when you were unemployed at that particular time?</i> <i>What do you think are the benefits of working from your perspective?</i>
Extract from Reflective Account 13th April 2020	<i>You talked about work being terrifying, what is it about work</i>

<i>"I am just finished interviewing Alex and gosh it was a great interview... It was really interesting hearing her perspective about how work is part of adulthood and really is a big marker and transition point and she highlighted how this was a struggle for her, she mentioned how 'nobody tells you how to do any of this' I think this is really interesting, because she is right there is an expectation for people to go to work when they reach adulthood but actually it's a huge transition point and takes so much navigating and managing in terms of what job to get, what to study if you have the opportunity and negotiating the whole work culture."</i>	<i>that is terrifying for you, can you expand on this please?</i> <i>In your last interview, you referred to the challenge of getting/moving into the world of work as an adult, what is this particular challenge for you? Can you explain it to me in more detail?</i>
Extract from Reflective Journal 25th March 2020 <i>"What is really striking for me as the researcher is the multitude of barriers that the women are highlighting with regard to managing work, they are mentioning, themselves and their perceptions, feeling different, other people's perceptions, aspects of the environment, the work itself and being overwhelmed, yet the women are actually in work and are employed. This also coincides with the literature which didn't paint a great picture in terms of autistic women working. Most of the literature highlighted the actual challenges and barriers of work. Many of the women have significantly highlighted this thus far in the interviews. I think in the second interview I need to try and tease out what is/isn't supporting the women in work."</i>	<i>What do you think would support autistic women in the workplace? services and supports?</i> <i>What do you think would support autistic women in terms of work?</i> <i>Can you tell me what you think employers can do to support autistic women at work?</i>

Table 3.5 An example of questions guided by the researcher's reflexivity

Links to the Literature

Prior to, and throughout, the data collection process, I conducted literature searches and reviewed literature pertaining to the neurodiversity perspective, research priorities within the autistic community, higher education, work, autism, and women. This

knowledge bank also influenced my understanding and my perspectives as a researcher. It allowed me to identify the gaps in the literature and offered an avenue in which to explore these areas in the second interview with the women, as well as support answering the research question. An example of some of the questions identified for exploration with all the women are detailed in table 3.6.

• <i>What would you identify as your strengths and challenges?</i> • <i>What are your plans and goals for the future?</i> • <i>What would be your dream job?</i> • <i>What do you think would support autistic women in terms of work?</i> • <i>Can you tell me what you think employers can do to support autistic women at work?</i>

Table 3.6 Examples of external questioning, questions related to pertinent topics related to the research question and aims

Consultation with Supervisory Team - A technique for practicing reflexivity and ensuring credibility

I as the Ph.D. student was conducting the interviews with the women, however I was supported and guided by a three-member supervisory team of academics, who all brought different experiences and expertise to the research. I met with this supervisory team very regularly and in particular during the data collection and preliminary analysis phase (between interview one and interview two) to support me in developing an interview guide for interview two. The interview transcripts were shared with the three-member team, allowing familiarity with the interview data. Regular consultation and supervisory meetings took place during which a reflective approach was employed to allow for the review and discussion of the individual women’s interview one transcripts. I, as the primary researcher, presented my initial thoughts for discussion, peer review, debate, and refinement. I benefitted from these meetings, as these meetings an opportunity for peer de-briefing (Byrne, 2001; Janesick, 2007). The supervisory team brought fresh perspectives, outside of my own thoughts and it allowed for consultation and to consider

alternative explanations and understanding. It also allowed for good practice, in ensuring credibility and trustworthiness of the research (Byrne, 2001; Janesick, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Spall, 1998; Spillett, 2003).

The preliminary analysis steps outlined above supported me as the researcher in developing individual interview guides for interview two with each of the women. Open-ended, discursive style questions were developed on the basis of this preliminary analysis, together with external questions as discussed. I considered what had not been raised by the participants and considered what needed to be known to address the research question, as well as reflecting on the literature on the area of work and autism. An interview schedule was developed and formed the basis for the format and structure of interview two, which will be discussed in the next section. An example of an interview guide is provided in Appendix K.

3.7.9.3 Interview Two

The second interview enabled me to meet with the women again, after approximately one month. Following preliminary analysis of the first interview conducted with each of the women, an individual interview guide was devised for each of the women and guided the second interview as discussed in section 3.7.9.2 (An example of an interview schedule is presented in Appendix K). The opening of the second interview acted as a reflection, reorientation, and familiarisation process, where participants were prompted to reflect on their first interview and to share any updates about themselves since their last interview. The opening questions are identified in table 3.7 below.

Opening Questions:

Thanks again for taking the time to share your experiences with me, how has everything been for you since we last spoke?

You shared lots of your experiences in your first interview, have you reflected on this anymore?

Do you have any further thoughts or comments that have come to mind since we last spoke that you would like to share?

Table 3.7 Example of Opening Questions asked at the outset of the second interview

Participants were also invited to share their object/prop to further support them in the telling of their work story. Some participants brought up the use of the prop themselves while others were guided by the question related to the prop (See example in Table 3.8 below). Probing and follow-up questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013) were then used to encourage and support further discussion of work experiences (Padgett, 2016).

Question related to the prop:

We talked about the possibility of sharing an item/photo/object that depicts/expresses your story since leaving college and seeking employment, is there anything you would like to share?

Can you tell me about this item/object/photo?

Table 3.8 Example of Question related to the prop/object

A period of internal questioning then followed to clarify ambiguous points and to gather more information about a particular incident, experience, event, or perspective that was raised in the first interview and that was highlighted as an area for further exploration during the preliminary analysis (as discussed in section 3.7.9.2). These questions followed the internal questioning style utilised in the second part of the first interview and allowed for a richer description of events and topics raised in the first interview (See Table 3.9 for

examples). Once again it allowed for a narrative accuracy check to verify the accuracy of the women's account of an experience or event.

Follow up from the first interview:

In your last interview:

- *You talked about your path being 'windy and weird', what do you mean by this? You also said you wouldn't change it, why is that?*
- *You said that you experienced a 'massive big crash', can you explain this more to me? What do you think led you to this crash?*
- *You said that you had gone to education when you were in your early 20s as well, can you tell me a bit more about that period of education?*
- *You talked about leaving home at 16 years old and moving into your own flat and needing to get a job, can you tell me more about this period of time?*

Table 3.9 Examples of Internal Questioning used in the second interview

I utilised a responsive interviewing approach, listening to the women's answers and then asking questions based on the answers that they provided (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Further to these internal questions, a period of external questioning took place, and these questions were guided by exploring areas of work pertinent to the literature and topics not already discussed. The final part of the second interview focused on inviting participants to reflect and talk about their experience of being involved in the research and the interview process itself. The data garnered from this was also subject to analysis and is discussed in section 3.9.

It is important to highlight that participants were debriefed at each stage of the interview process. They were offered the opportunity to ask questions and I de-briefed with each woman given the sensitive nature of the topics raised in the interviews. Furthermore, unlike quantitative data collection, qualitative studies allow for a relationship to develop between the participant and the researcher. I may meet these women in the future through the autistic community and these interactions were discussed at the conclusion of the interviews. I discussed with the women whether they wanted to be acknowledged if I met them outside of the research relationship. All the women stated that they were in agreement and were happy to be acknowledged outside of the research participation. The

women were also advised that they would be informed of the overall research findings on publication.

3.7.10 The Interviewing Process for the Researcher

Throughout the interview process I remained open and receptive to the women's stories. Immediately, following the interviews I conducted a period of de-briefing by writing in my reflective journal (as discussed in 3.7.9.2) (See Appendix M and N). This time was set aside to reflect on the process, it allowed me to account for reflections, thoughts, and critique on the impact of the interview process to support future data analysis. The de-brief also allowed me to account for any non-linguistic data that was not recorded during the audio recording (Wengraf, 2019) and to identify any content from the interview that was of significant interest. Throughout the interview process and the data analysis phase of the study, I engaged in regular supervision with the three-member supervisory team, to clarify thoughts, assumptions, and concerns to ensure that I achieved an objective view and to further allow me to reflect on the interview process and my experiences and expectations and biases, to raise my awareness.

3.7.11 Considerations and Actions taken by the Researcher to ensure Wellbeing and Quality in Conducting Research with the Autistic Community

I employed several measures to safeguard the wellbeing and welfare of the participants during the research process. Furthermore, important considerations were also made in respect to the study design and its application to good practice guidelines in conducting research with the autistic community. As I had worked with the autistic community over the past fourteen years, I employed both my professional experience and my knowledge of the empirical literature in conducting the research study. Best practice guidelines have been developed to support researchers during the research process in conducting autism research (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Pellicano et al., 2017), such as the 'Starter Pack': Shaping Autism Research United Kingdom,

(<https://www.shapingautismresearch.co.uk/>) (Pellicano et al., 2017). This is an online booklet which provides practical ideas about how autistic people, and how their allies can work together in research. Additionally, I sought guidance from the Gowen and colleagues (2019) paper which identified guidelines for conducting research studies with the autistic community, and these assisted in guiding me through the different stages of the research process.

The steps that I took included:

Pre-study:

1. Establishing a reference group to advise on the local Irish context and provide advice and inform the research.
2. I determined through the literature and reference group that this research study was warranted and was identified as a priority need by the autistic community.

During Recruitment of the Participants:

1. The study information pack was reviewed by the reference group to ensure clarity in explaining the aims of the study and the commitment required by the participants in participating in the study.
2. I connected with online autistic communities to disseminate information on the study.
3. When participants contacted me initially to explore and indicate their willingness to participate in the study, I maintained close and timely contact to indicate commitment and to support and build trust in the relationship that was beginning to be established.
4. I was honest and transparent about the research and its aims and answered any questions that the participants had in relation to the research process and procedures.

During the Data Gathering Phase:

1. Prior to the scheduled interview I confirmed via email or phone the process that would be followed to reduce any anxieties regarding the interview.

2. In scheduling the three face-to-face interviews with the participants, I discussed access and modes of transport to the meeting place. A common arrival point was suggested to meet at, to remove any concerns about ambiguities in relation to meeting. The interviews were conducted in spaces chosen by the participant, and which were safe and confidential.
3. I conducted the virtual interviews in a quiet and confidential space. The participants chose where they wished to be interviewed within their own homes.
4. The women were made aware that they could take breaks when and if they needed to.
5. I was aware of how potentially sensitive topics may arise during the interview process for the participants. I responded sensitively and calmly when these situations arose and provided a supportive and non-judgemental environment to support the participant to openly discuss these topics and experiences, allowing a break if needed.
6. Consent was sought throughout the data gathering process, and prior to each interview.
7. I de-briefed by checking in to see if the participants had any questions or concerns relating to the previous interview conducted or the current interview.
8. Participants were also advised that they could ask questions or raise any concerns at any stage.
9. Participants were signposted to supports and resources when required.
10. I ensured that sufficient time was set aside to conduct the interviews, ensuring that the women had the opportunity to process the questions and respond as they wished.

Post Interview:

All the women were offered a copy of their interview transcripts to review after the interviews. No participant requested a copy of their transcript, and this was appreciated by the researcher. The participants were also advised that the research findings would be shared with them when the study concluded.

To safeguard my own wellbeing through the data collection phase, I sought and received regular supervision from my three-member supervisory team. I raised concerns and issues with them, and these were discussed. I also benefitted from the support of an extensive network of experienced researchers, practitioners, academics, fellow doctorate students, and colleagues. Furthermore, I maintained a reflective journal to detail thoughts, concerns and worries throughout the research process and overall study and write-up (See Appendix M and N).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

3.8.1 Ethical Approval

This research project was subject to guidelines and principles established by the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Committee, Trinity College Dublin and received full ethical approval. Subsequent amendments and approvals were made over the course of the study in line with changes required as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Final amendments to the study were sought and granted in April 2020. See Appendix A, B, C and D for ethical approval documents. Some of the ethical principles, considerations, as well as the approaches that I specifically associated with this study are discussed further in the following sections.

3.8.2 Participant Consent

Informed consent is an essential element of the research process and requires participants to understand the research purpose, their rights as participants and what their voluntary participation involves, potential implications of participating, and how data and findings will be used (Eynon et al., 2017; Salmons, 2016). I employed informed consent at several stages of the research process. The participants were provided with information packs containing detailed information about the study through an information poster, the participant information leaflet, and the consent form (Appendix E, F). These stated the

purpose of the study, the research process, the participants right to withdraw at any point, how the study would be disseminated and how their identity would be protected and anonymised. Given that the interviews were in the main conducted virtually, consent forms were emailed to each of the participants. The participants signed the consent form and returned it to me via email, I then signed the form, and a copy of the completed consent forms were returned again via email to each of the participants. The advantage of the consent form ensured that the participants were given the opportunity to be fully informed of the study and the implications of their participation was addressed. In addition, consent was also revisited within the different stages of the interviews and oral consent was sought before sensitive issues were discussed. Participants were adults and had capacity to give consent.

3.8.3 Participant Confidentiality

Care was taken to manage confidentiality. At every juncture along the research process, I maintained confidentiality to protect the participant's identity. Detailed information about confidentiality was included in the participant information leaflet and the consent form (Appendix E, F). I also explained how confidentiality would be maintained throughout the research process in advance of data collection and at subsequent points along the data collection process which aimed to build a trusting environment and relationship between myself and the participants. I was cognisant that the autistic community within the Republic of Ireland was relatively small, and therefore I was conscious to ensure that participants would not be identifiable. Participants' names were removed from all transcripts, pseudonyms were used instead to protect their identities. The occupations of the participants and their environmental context were described in approximate terms to assist in maintaining confidentiality. All quotes used within the write up of the dissertation and in any presentations or publications were reviewed to ensure that there was no identifiable information present.

3.8.4 Data Protection and Management

In line with the granted ethical approval, all material gathered throughout the research study was kept securely in line with the data management requirements at the time of the study, complying with the European Union and national data protection law: the European Union General Data Protection Regulation 2016 ('GDPR') and Data Protection Acts 1988-2018. I completed a Data Protection Impact Assessment which was reviewed and approved by the Data Protection Officer within Trinity College Dublin.

3.9 Data Analysis Method

3.9.1 Recording and Transcribing

All interviews were audio recorded using two specific devices: a computer-based audio recorder and a Dictaphone. The audio files were then transcribed by a professional transcriber following each interview (in line with ethical approval). The professional transcriber signed a Memorandum of Understanding and a confidentiality statement, in line with ethical approval. Professional transcription was completed for time efficiency and to allow me to review and conduct a preliminary initial analysis of the first interview to support the development of the interview guide for the second interview. I listened back to each individual audio recorded interview to ensure its accuracy with the transcripts and to make any additional notes for pauses, emphasis, and/or emotions.

3.9.2 Data Analysis Method Employed

Data analysis is often described as a complex and 'messy' task, given the amount of data collected (Lester et al., 2020, p. 98). Deciding on an approach to analyse the women's narratives was complex as narrative research can utilise a variety of methods for analysis (Trahar, 2009) – there is no singular approach to how an analysis of narratives should be conducted (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The method of data analysis chosen by the researcher was based on the work of Polkinghorne (1995) and was framed within Polkinghorne's

analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995). Analysis of narratives sees the stories as the basic unit of analysis and the analysis of the narratives begins within each story (Kramp, 2004). Analysis of narratives utilises narrated stories that are gathered as data, which are analysed by identifying and seeking themes, notions, concepts, or categories among and across the stories (Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995), that results in “descriptions of themes that hold across the stories” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.12).

This approach was chosen by the researcher as it presented the most comprehensive method of analysis, whereby the experiences and stories of the women could be presented and has been identified as being an appropriate method for inductively analysing narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995). Smith-Chandler and Swart (2014), identify that this analysis process is specifically recommended for disability research, because it has the capacity to identify themes that reveal “experiences of disability that are inevitably encapsulated in the unique stories that the individual chooses to tell” (p.428) and that relate to the manner in which the social context impinges on individual meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach therefore puts the perspectives of the women at the foreground of debate and discussion, in contrast to other types of research which neglect the perspectives of those whom the research is about (Goodley & Tregaskis, 2006; Milton & Bracher, 2013). The analysis of narrative data allows for the development of understanding of the meaning that individuals in this case the women give to their lives and their experiences through the telling of their story (Kim, 2016), with the goal to interpret meanings and explore the “nuances and interrelationships among aspects of experience that the reader might apply to better understand other related situations” (Josselson, 2011, p. 239). The analysis of narratives as an analytical method has been employed in other narrative research studies, such as a study conducted by Spirtos and Gilligan (2022), which explored the disability related identity experiences of young people with hemiplegic cerebral palsy, as well as a study conducted by Sharp, Bye and Cusick, (2018), which explored the experiences of emerging adults with Cerebral palsy from their own perspective.

In employing this method of analysis, the researcher is required to analyse the data and to inductively identify themes firstly within each participant's whole narrative and then to explore the wider conceptualisations and comparison between and across the women's stories and narratives (Riessman, 2008). In conducting the analysis of narratives, I sought to identify and discover common themes and concepts across the participants and within each of the participant's individual narratives, signifying similarities and differences of experiences in relation to work (Kim, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Through the analysis of narratives, I sought to develop a holistic understanding of each of the women's narratives that are gathered as data; in this case; shared across their two interviews and to then identify the themes within the first and second interview (Kramp, 2004). Every effort was made to capture the experiences narrated. The analysis of narratives characterised in this approach moves from stories to common elements (Polkinghorne, 1995). The goal therefore is to focus on discovering common themes or salient constructs that derive from the stories and to organise them into categories (Polkinghorne, 1995), by which the findings would be centralised and arranged around descriptions of themes that are collected across and within all the stories to make them accessible (Kramp, 2004). Paradigmatic analysis is generally used in qualitative research, however the difference within narrative inquiry is that the analysis is on the storied narratives as data. Paradigmatic analysis is also concerned with the relationships between themes and the commonalities and similarities that exist across the data (Kim, 2016), while analysis of narratives is coming from the individual narratives themselves.

To conduct an analysis of narratives, the practical guidance regarding the process was guided by the method of reflexive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). Many authors have maintained that given that reflexive thematic analysis is a process used by many qualitative methods, that can be used to assist researchers in data analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Holloway & Todres, 2003; Ryan & Bernard, 2000), as it provides a flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). When using reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher is searching for patterns within the data that allows the identification and generation of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I applied an

inductive approach to thematic analysis, deriving meaning and searching and creating themes that were driven from the data, rather than utilising a deductive approach driven by theory and without any preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In utilising the reflexive thematic approach to support the analysis of narratives, I recognised my subjective self, as the “*reflexive researcher*” throughout the research process inherent within the values of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.5). The reflexive approach highlights me, as the researcher and my active role in knowledge production (Braun & Clarke 2019). Codes represent the researcher’s interpretations of patterns of meaning across the dataset. Reflexive thematic analysis is considered a reflection of the researcher’s interpretive analysis of the data conducted and is about “the researcher’s reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). Reflexive thematic analysis sits exclusively under qualitative paradigms, including constructionism (Braun & Clarke 2019, 2022) and therefore is suitable as a guide for the analysis of narratives (Peta, 2017).

Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) outline a six-phase process for thematic analysis as outlined in Table 3.10, which were followed for this study. I, as the researcher used this approach specifically in analysing the first interview (Study One) and the second interview (Study Two) conducted with each of the twelve women. Additionally, this approach was utilised to analysis the feedback from the participants engagement and participation in the study garnered in the second interview, which is presented as Study Three in the findings of the study (Chapter Five). Figure 3.2 below visually depicts the data analysis conducted. Therefore, the six-phase process (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was applied to each of the studies, and this is discussed in more detail below.

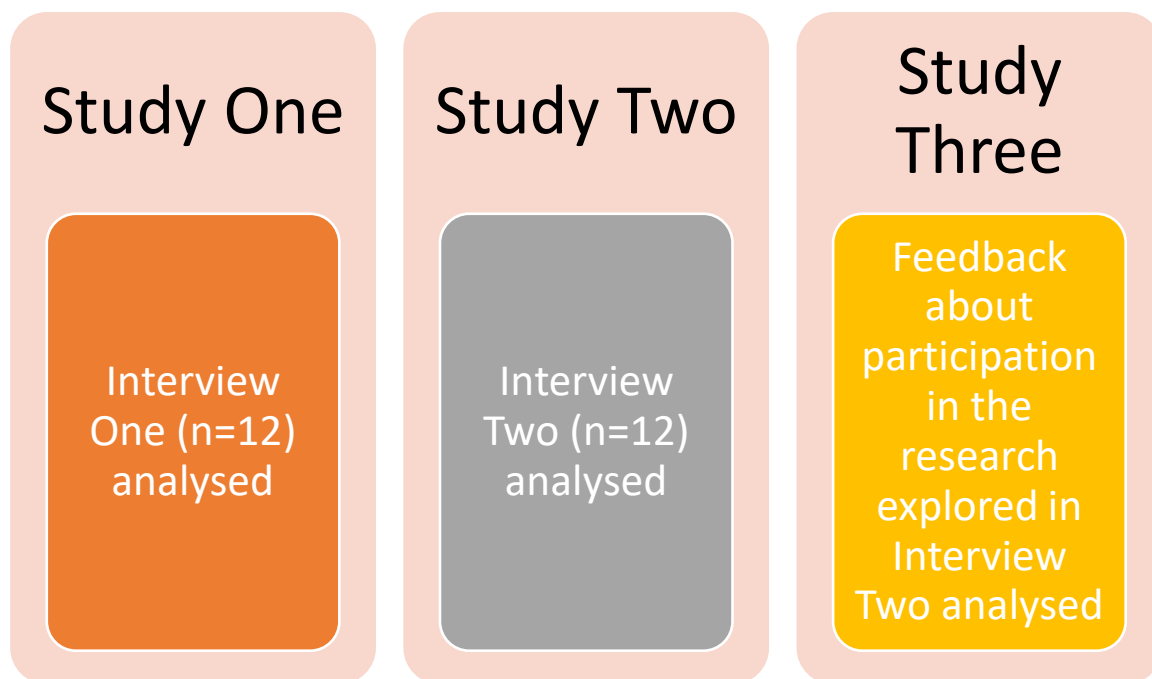


Figure 3.3 Data Analysis conducted, representing Study One, Study Two and Study Three

Phase One: Familiarisation with the Data

Familiarisation entails the reading and re-reading of the entire dataset (firstly with all the first interviews with the women: Interview One and secondly with all the second interviews with the women: Interview Two) to become intimately familiar with the data. This is of huge importance as this is the phase in which I as the researcher began to immerse myself in the data. In this phase of the study, I read the verbatim transcripts transcribed professionally by the transcriber and conducted an accuracy check by listening to the audio files to ensure its accuracy with the transcripts and to make any additional notes for pauses, emphasis, and/or emotions. Following this I re-read the transcripts and took note of any ideas and thoughts about the data and how it related to the research question. Some preliminary notes were made during the early iterations of familiarisation with the data and an example of this is evidenced in Appendix P.

At this point I uploaded the transcripts, collating all the first interview transcripts for each of the women and then all the second interview transcripts for each of the women to NVIVO qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2019) (See Appendix P, for

evidence of the transcripts uploaded to NVIVO). NVIVO was used to manage the large volume of data collected via the two narrative interviews with each of the women (Robins & Eisen, 2017). In using the qualitative data analysis software, I did not capitulate the task of interpretation and data analysis to the logic of the computer; rather the computer software was used as a tool for efficiency and manageability of the data and to support the six-phase process of thematic analysis (Hoover & Koerber, 2011). NVivo also served as a tool for transparency and the production of an audit trail, which was deemed essential to ensure trustworthiness and plausibility of the research study (Bonello & Meehan, 2019).

Phase Two: Generating initial codes

Having read and familiarised myself with the data (each interview) and having ideas about what was in the data and what were initial thoughts (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I sought to generate initial codes from the data for each of the interviews and for each study (Study One and Study Two). Codes are the fundamental building blocks of what will later become themes (Byrne, 2022). This was conducted by reviewing the data line by line of each of the interviews and identifying codes, attending to each data item with equal consideration, and identifying aspects of data items that were interesting and may be informative in developing themes as I progressed in the analysis. Open, largely descriptive inductive codes were generated, with some sections of the data placed into multiple codes, and any item of data that was useful in addressing the research question was coded. I then refined the codes through multiple rounds. I also combined the use of NVIVO with more traditional pen and paper approaches to identify codes within the data. Appendix P provides evidence of Phase Two: Generating initial codes for each of the interviews.

Phase Three: Generating Themes

This phase began when all relevant data items were coded for each of the interviews. Following this, I sought to identify and generate themes of aggregated meaning and meaningfulness within and across the separate interviews for both Interview One and Interview Two (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The coded data was reviewed to explore how different codes may be combined according to shared meanings so that they may form

themes or sub-themes within and across the interviews. This sometimes resulted in collapsing and combining multiple codes that shared a similar underlying concept into one single code. While also identifying that one code may turn out to be representative of an over-arching narrative within the data and be promoted to a theme (Braun & Clarke, 2022). During this process, I was actively reflecting and considering the relationship among and across the different codes and identifying a narrative within this theme that supported answering the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and relevant data and excerpts were placed into these themes. I used both NVIVO and printed copies of the codes to support this phase, as well as postcard size pieces of card to support the management and to help generate initial themes (See Appendix P which provides evidence of Phase Three: Generating Themes). At this point in the analysis, I assembled codes into initial candidate themes, see examples of Phase Three in Appendix P. Throughout phase three, I consulted with the three-member supervisory team discussing the themes that had been generated. This offered the opportunity to explore new thoughts and perspectives on the initial themes that were generated and me, as the researcher to consider these perspectives to support the trustworthiness of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Phase Four: Reviewing Potential Themes

In the fourth phase, two levels of review of potential themes took place. At level one, I reviewed the relationships among the data items and codes that informed each theme and sub-theme. At level two, the candidate themes were reviewed in relation to the data set. I ensured that the themes were an accurate reflection of the stories shared by the women and were applicable to the data within interview One and Interview Two (Byrne, 2022). See Appendix P which provides evidence for Phase Four: Reviewing Potential Themes. Once again, these potential themes were discussed and reviewed by the three-member supervisory team and further changes took place.

Phase Five: Defining and Naming Themes

During this phase, I was tasked with presenting a detailed analysis for the each of the themes (in all studies; Study One; Analysis of Interview One; Study Two; Analysis of Interview Two and Study Three; analysis of the feedback garnered from participants in interview two in relation to their involvement in the research) while considering how each theme fit into the overall story in relation to the research question. Again, I benefited

significantly from supervisory discussions with the three-member supervisory team, discussing each of the themes and in ensuring that each theme held true across the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Part of telling this narrative story, was ordering the themes in a way that best reflected the overall story, and these were organised according to each study and re-organised before a final consensus was made. Finally, I revisited the names of all the themes with the intent to ensure that they best reflected the story being shared for each of the studies (Byrne, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017).

Phase Six: Producing the Report

This final phase involved the write up of the findings through the finding's chapters, presented here as Chapter Four (Findings from Study One are presented) and Chapter Five (Findings from Study Two and Three are presented), as well as the discussion chapter, Chapter Six. In writing up the report in the form of this Ph.D. dissertation, I sought to ensure that the voice of the participants was up front and centre. Therefore I utilised direct shorter quotes within the narrative, to support in the understanding of the specific point being addressed and direct longer block quotes to illustrate the narrative points and ensure the participants voice was shared, as well as illustrating the story of the data, ensuring that there was 'thick descriptions' offered, as suggested by Lincoln & Guba (1985), to highlight the merit of the analysis conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Short and longer quotes represented the interesting extracts from the participants providing compelling evidence under each of the themes generated which related to the overall research question.

While the six-phases present a logical and linear process of moving forward through the phases, the analysis was recursive and iterative, and I moved back and forth through the phases as necessary during the analysis phase of each of the studies; Study One, Study Two and Study Three.

On completion of the analysis, I returned to the reference group with the findings generated from the data analysis. This offered an opportunity to discuss and debate the findings from the study, to ascertain their applicability to the autistic community, and to further enhance the quality and trustworthiness of the data analysis stage (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). I, as the researcher was also able to explore their perspectives and thoughts on how best to now move forward with the autistic communities to make the research results visible and to find a way forward for dissemination, with autistic women themselves, the wider autism organisations, and policy makers.

Table 3.10 Braun and Clarke (2022) Six-Phase Approach used to guide the analysis of narratives

Phase	Title	Description
One	Familiarisation with the Data	• Accuracy checks conducted of the transcribed transcripts. • Management of the interviews separately as Study One, Study Two and Study Three. • Reading and re-reading of the data took place, noting initial ideas and thoughts. • Interview transcripts were imported into NVIVO.
Two	Generating initial codes (Appendix P)	• Initial and systematic coding of the interviews to de-construct the data from its original chronology into initial non-hierarchical general codes took place. • Codes were assigned clear definitions.
Three	Generating Themes (Appendix P)	• The coded data was reviewed and analysed to identify codes that could be combined according to shared meanings so that they may form themes or sub-themes. • Collation of data relevant to potential themes identified.
Four	Reviewing Potential Themes	• The candidate themes generated in phase three were reviewed and refined in relation to the coded data items and the entire dataset at level one and level two.
Five	Defining and Naming Themes	• A detailed analysis of each of the themes was presented for each study; Study One, Study Two and Study Three.
Six	Producing the Report	• This involved writing the report in the form of the thesis that tells the story of the data and that ensures the nuanced aspects, while answering the research question. • The provision of robust evidence in the form of short and longer quotes and extracts from the data to provide evidence for the final analysis, as presented in Study One, Study Two and Study Three which are presented in chapter four and five.

3.10 Strategies to ensure Trustworthiness

In designing and conducting a study it is essential to consider quality to ensure that the study is rigorous and utilises a methodological approach that yields meaningful and useful results (Nowell et al., 2017). Trustworthiness is one-way qualitative researchers can persuade themselves and readers that their research findings are worthy of attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Quality control measures were employed to ensure trustworthiness of this research study (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Seale (1999) recommends researchers to employ and incorporate trustworthiness criteria, developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) within qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend employing four specific techniques and metrics; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to establish the trustworthiness of a study and to “guide the field activities and to impose checks to be certain that the proposed procedures are in fact being followed” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 330). There is a consensus within the larger qualitative research community, that the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) is critical and highly influential in ensuring trustworthiness and the importance of its worth. Hence Lincoln and Guba’s criteria were applied in this study to ensure trustworthiness.

The techniques and actions that I took, as the researcher to ensure trustworthiness are presented within the four-quality metrics as outlined by Lincoln and Guba, (1985) below:

Credibility: Credibility refers to establishing confidence that the results (from the perspective of the participants) are true, credible, and believable (Forero et al., 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and is one of the most significant factors in establishing the trustworthiness of any qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). Credibility refers to ensuring that the research conducted is undertaken in accordance with good research practice (Lincoln & Guba, 2013) and can be assured utilising various techniques (Forero et al., 2018; Nowell et al., 2017).

These techniques are addressed in this research study, the literature review in chapter two, outlined the understanding that I gained as a researcher of the different aspects of the research topic, prior to commencing this study. I also outlined my position as the

researcher at the outset of this dissertation in the introduction chapter and identified the neurodiversity lens and perspective through which I was conducting this study, as well as outlining the philosophical framework of ontological relativism and an epistemological social constructivist standpoint (Braun & Clark, 2013), which is discussed at the beginning of this chapter, alongside the methods utilised to recruit the sample.

I had prolonged engagement with all the women in the study, meeting them on two occasions, the interviews took place within one month of each other and the total duration of interviewing across the two interviews with each woman was on average 4.1 hours demonstrating prolonged engagement with each participant. During this timeframe I had the opportunity to develop a rapport and build a trusting relationship facilitating an open discourse with the women. Furthermore, having the opportunity to carry out piloting, consulting with the reference group and engaging with the participants, I had the opportunity to learn more about the autistic culture and community. Additionally, I engaged in researcher peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), by consulting with the three-member supervisory team, who all brought different backgrounds, experience, and expertise to the research study at hand. During these consultations and meetings, particularly during the data analysis phase, I had the opportunity to explore a broader range of ideas and generated themes which I had identified. The interview transcripts were shared with the supervisory team and discussions and new perspectives and ideas were discussed in a reflective and constructive manner to support review and refinement of the findings. Furthermore, I liaised with other academics, and practitioners, as a form of peer debriefing in a confidential manner, to support me and uncover my perspectives, assumptions, which in turn enabled and supported me towards being aware of my position and stance within the research process. Moreover, the reference group was also consulted on the findings of the study. During these meetings the findings were discussed and explored in relation to their credibility from the Irish autistic community perspective. Negative case analysis was also conducted, which explored the differences across the women's stories. Time and space was provided at the outset of the second interview with the women to allow for further reflection on areas that were raised in the first interview. It also offered the

opportunity to allow clarification of points raised in the first interview and acted as a form of checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability: Transferability refers to the researcher's responsibility for providing thick descriptions, to transfer the findings and provide contextual information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and is a way of achieving a type of external validity. In doing so, I sought to provide thick and rich descriptions. In this study, Chapter Four and Five, detail the findings of the study and have provided rich descriptions of the women's stories pertaining to each theme, which provided evidence of thick descriptions. The findings have also been situated within the body of literature and theories that exist and this is presented in Chapter Six. Transferability also refers to the detailed provision of information about the phenomenon of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). A clear justification for the need for this study, as well as a rationale for solely including autistic women within the study has been presented specifically in Chapter One and throughout the thesis. A reference advisory group was employed to inform the research design method. The methodology, presented in this chapter, outlines a detailed description of every step taken within the research process, together with a clear rationale and justification for decisions made.

Dependability: Research dependability relates to the researcher's methods of data collection and data analysis and to achieve dependability, researchers need to ensure that the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Tobin & Begley, 2004). In this study, analysis of narratives guided by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was utilised to analyse the narratives shared by the twelve women, conducted across two interviews. From an interpretive perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), understanding is co-created and there is no objective truth or reality to which the results of a study can be compared. Braun and Clarke (2020) highlight that the researcher will influence the research and therefore the interpretation of the data collected, however what is important is the techniques to manage this (Creswell, 1998). The process of ensuring dependability was maintained through the creation of verbatim transcripts from the audio recorded interviews with the women, together with the documentation of the steps taken during the research process, which have been described in detail in this chapter of the thesis.

Furthermore, in conducting the analysis of the data, the six-steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) were followed and allowed for frequent re-reading of the data to ensure that the themes identified can be reliably observed within the data collected. Furthermore, evidence of data analysis is also provided within the appendices (See Appendix L for a table highlighting how Trustworthiness was managed during each phase of analysis of narratives guided by reflexive thematic analysis). In the write up of the Methodology and Findings chapters, I, as the researcher utilised the Guidelines for reviewers and editors evaluating thematic analysis manuscripts, produced by Clarke and Braun (2023) to support me in ensuring that the write-up of the Ph.D. dissertation demonstrates quality in reflexive thematic analysis across Study One, Two and Study Three. I, as the researcher also outlined my positionality and insider status at the outset of this thesis and maintained a reflective journal to support and help to systemize, relate, and cross reference ideas and thoughts (Halpren, 1983) (See Appendix M and N).

Confirmability: Confirmability is concerned with establishing that the researcher's interpretations and findings are clearly derived from the data, requiring the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations have been reached (Tobin & Begley, 2004). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved. I maintained clear justifications and rationales for the theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices that I made across the research process as depicted in this methodology chapter, as recommended by Koch (1994).

In further ensuring quality and dependability in the study, I employed reflexive auditing and journaling (Creswell & Miller, 2000) to document the process of inquiry, thoughts, perceptions and ideas about the process, findings, and reasons for making decisions within the study. Bias and assumptions are always present in the research act (Stahl & King, 2020) and can shape the research direction (Charmaz, 2014). I documented and provided a researcher statement within Chapter One of this study, outlining my background, assumptions, and perspective on this study and phenomenon. Furthermore, examples of reflexivity and its impact on devising a format for interview two is set out in section 3.7.9.2.

A reflective personal statement, reflecting on the research process is also provided in Appendix M, which highlights the change in my perspectives and decision making across the research process.

Finally, supervisory meetings were conducted with a three-member supervisory team to review and attest the findings and interpretations. To extend this, I also presented rich and thick quotes from the participants to demonstrate the strong links between the data and interpretations.

3.11 Researcher Reflexivity within the Research Process

The need for researcher reflexivity in qualitative research, especially when data is gathered and collected through the use of interview, is well documented (Macqueen & Patterson, 2021; Peddle, 2021). Reflexivity within the research process is the means and process of reflecting critically on oneself as a researcher (Bradbury-Jones, 2007). It is the active acknowledgement and scrutinization of one's influences, one's assumptions, one's beliefs and one's theoretical predispositions and preferences (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017; Yardley, 2015) and is a shift away from a focus on data collected to the internal dialogue of researchers to support what is known and how it is known (Finlay, 2002; Patton, 2002). It is central to the construction of knowledge in qualitative research (Narayanasamy, 2015) and is particularly pertinent when analysing the nature and quality of data obtained through narrative inquiry, where the interview data can be affected and impacted by multiple aspects (Brinkmann & Kvale 2005). These include the perspective of the researcher (Patton, 2015), the partnership and relationship between the participants and the researcher (Narayanasamy, 2015) and the impact that the participants and the researcher have on each other (Darawsheh, 2014). Engaging in reflexivity and acknowledging the active presence of the researcher ensures that the research is transparent, and therefore reflexivity can also be considered a quality control measure (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Cho & Trent, 2006).

Reflexivity was utilised throughout the different phases of this research study (Patton, 2015). In conducting the research, I was not only present in the participant's narratives as the story recipient, but in the interpretation. Patton's (2015) concept of "triangulated reflexive inquiry" (p. 72) offers a framework for researchers to work through issues in the research process and this was adapted and utilised throughout each stage of the research process. I maintained a reflective journal to document and reflect on thoughts, perspectives, values, and beliefs, which have been shaped by my previous and current professional and personal background. I considered questions such as what do I know? How do I know what I know? How have my perceptions and my background affected the data I have collected and analysed? Additionally, I also considered the women that participated in the study and reflected on what might have shaped their views and experiences and how the participants perceived me as the researcher and the impact that this had on data collection and on the findings. Furthermore, considerations about the audience and the people who read this study was also considered and reflected on. This reflexive process exists within a cultural, social, and political context in which the researcher, the participants and the audience are positioned (Patton, 2015). Using the questions proposed by Patton supported me to answer these periodically throughout the research process to shape and add meaning to the findings. Evidence of how reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, is evident from a reflective piece which details the reflexive process from my perspective, as the researcher engaged in the research process. This is presented in the Appendix M and utilises extracts from my reflective journal as evidence of reflexivity and bracketing (See Appendix N) (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Hanson, 1994).

3.12 Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the experiences of autistic graduate women in navigating the world of work. The methods utilised in undertaking this study have ensured that this research is underpinned by a coherent philosophical framework grounded within an ontological relativist and social constructivist standpoint that lends itself to a qualitative approach used. A narrative inquiry framework was chosen to guide the research study and

a justification for its use has been provided. In employing a narrative approach, in-depth and multiple interviews were conducted with the twelve women that participated in this study, to hear their voices and experiences about their working lives. In the first interview, a single narrative open question focused on exploring the women's stories of work allowed the women the opportunity to choose which areas they wished to focus on and the experiences they wished to share and describe, in relation to the question presented, this was followed by a period of internal questioning to support their recall and to elicit more detail about their experiences to build on their story. Interview Two took place with each participant one month later and utilised an interview schedule which was developed following preliminary analysis of each of the women's individual interviews. A prop was utilised to further support the women in the telling of their story. Additionally, the women were also asked about their participation in the research study to glean their perspectives and views. An analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995), guided by the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was utilised to analysis each of the two sets of interviews. Above all, the selected methods discussed within this chapter have successfully addressed the research question resulting in research findings presented as three distinct studies (Study One, Study Two and Study Three), which highlight the ways in which autistic graduate women have experienced the world of work and which has illuminated their meanings attached to their personal experience. The findings from this research study will now be presented in the next two chapters; Chapter Four will present the findings from Study One, while the subsequent findings chapter; Chapter Five will present the findings from Study Two and Study Three.

Chapter Four - An Introduction to the Participants and Findings from Study One

4.1 Introduction and Overview of the Findings

This study sought to explore the experiences of autistic graduate women in navigating the world of work. A key aim was to build an understanding of the work journeys and experiences for these women and the influences on their experiences. Two interviews were conducted with twelve women who had completed higher education within the past ten years. As presented in the Methodology chapter (Section 3.9.2), the two interviews were analysed separately using an analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995), guided by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The findings of the two interviews (Study One and Study Two) are presented separately in this current chapter and in the subsequent chapter. Study Three, which follows as a separate section in Chapter Five presents the perceptions of the women of their participation in the study.

This current chapter: Chapter Four commences with an introduction to the twelve women that consented to participate and share their work experiences. A short descriptive account of each of the women is provided including contextual background, including age, educational attainment, and a brief outline of their work journey to date is presented. This is then followed by a presentation of the themes that were identified from the first interview (Study One).

4.2 An Introduction to the Women

Table 4.1 presents demographic information with the pseudonyms for the twelve women who participated in the research with an age range of 26 to 53 years. The majority (n=8) live in urban areas within the Republic of Ireland, while four lived in rural areas.

Table 4. 1 Overview of Participants

#	Pseudonym	Age	Environmental Context	Current Employment Position or Most Recent Position	Area of Employment	Worker Status	Qualifications
1	Sally	33 Years	Urban Area	Administrator	Marketing & Publishing	Employed	Postgraduate Level
2	Judith	36 Years	Urban Area	Technical Support Engineer	Technical	Employed	Postgraduate Level
3	Grace	45 Years	Urban Area	Administrator	Most recent role in Arts	Unemployed	Graduate level
4	Jenny	31 Years	Urban Area	Educator and Trainer	Education & Training	Unemployed	Postgraduate Level
5	Angela	46 Years	Urban Area	Administrative Manager	Administration Services	Employed	Graduate Level
6	Leah	43 Years	Urban Area	Care & Community Provider	Community and Social Care	Employed	Graduate Level
7	Martha	26 Years	Rural Area	Translator	All areas	Self-Employed	Graduate Level
8	Alex	30 years	Rural Area	Student	Student	Unemployed	Graduate Level
9	Brid	53 Years	Rural Area	Educator and Trainer	Education & Training	Self-Employed	Postgraduate Level
10	Martina	43 years	Rural Area	Educator and Trainer	Education & Training	Self-Employed	Graduate Level
11	Ciara	32 Years	Urban Area	Administrator	Administration Services	Employed	Postgraduate Level
12	Sarah	34 years	Urban Area	Educator and Trainer	Education & Training	Employed	Postgraduate Level

Nine of the women were employed, three were unemployed, one participant; Jenny, became unemployed following her first interview. All participants had qualifications at undergraduate degree level, while half (n=6) also held postgraduate qualification either at Masters, Postgraduate Diploma or Postgraduate Certificate level. The women worked in a myriad of areas across their working careers, including retail, hospitality, education and training, entertainment, administration, finance, computing, and social care, within the private and public sector.

4.2.1 Presenting the Participants

This section provides a short, descriptive account of each of the individual women who participated in this study, including a short note on the objects that some of the women brought to their second interview to represent their work experiences.

Sally

Sally is a thirty-three-year-old woman who lives in an urban area. Sally describes her school life at both primary and secondary education as difficult, but then describes her entry into university studying within the area of sciences, as a true personal achievement. Despite doing well academically at university, Sally's first step in navigating the world of work presented issues for her as she tried to secure an internship for her course while in university. She attended ten interviews but was unsuccessful in securing a position. As a result, Sally began to seek support within the university, querying how these challenges may be related to being autistic. Sally was subsequently diagnosed as autistic at the age of 22. On graduation, Sally secured her first job, through a disability internship programme, accepting a six-month contract working. From completion of the internship onwards, Sally experienced periods of employment, followed by long periods of unemployment. She returned to education on two separate occasions to complete postgraduate qualifications. After a long period of unemployment in receipt of Disability Allowance, Sally returned to employment on a part-time basis and is currently working.

Sally presented a photograph of a set of work keys as an object to represent her work experiences. This facilitated a discussion around her current working role and the responsibility that she has at work, which she values.

Judith

Judith is a thirty-six-year-old woman, originally from outside of Ireland. Judith lives in an urban area. She was diagnosed as autistic at 31 years of age. Judith describes her early

education experiences as positive with Judith, doing well academically in school. On finishing post-primary education, Judith chose to study within the area of science and mathematics, because she enjoyed this area and had some talent in these subjects. Judith experienced two short periods of burnout during her time in university following exams and towards the end of her final year of her degree, as she found the demands of the course stressful. She finished university with a Masters degree and decided to go travelling and work abroad. She returned home and took up a temporary position in administration for five months before applying for an internal role within a technology department, where she worked for three years before experiencing another burnout. Judith took a period of sick leave and then ceased work. She returned to education and completed a postgraduate qualification in the area of technology. On completion, she sought employment through a disability recruitment agency, gaining employment within the technology sector, where she has been working for the past five years.

Judith presented a set of headphones; this object was a significant accommodation that she uses in work to support her to manage the noise of the sensory environment.

Grace

Grace lives in an urban area in Ireland. On completion of secondary education within her native country, Grace commenced several different college courses in different areas, such as business, finance, administration, and languages, however, she did not complete any of these courses. In her early twenties, she moved abroad and started working part-time in administration. She once again made attempts to return to education but did not finish the courses. On moving to Ireland, she pursued work opportunities, and had several short-term jobs. She returned to university to complete a degree in the area of arts in her late thirties and successfully graduated and commenced a job within this field. Grace subsequently decided to change career paths and returned to education, however, again had difficulties with the demands of the course. As a result of her ongoing difficulties in education and employment Grace sought support and was diagnosed as autistic two years ago. Grace has been unemployed since 2019.

Grace presented her social welfare slip, as the object to depict her working experiences. For Grace, this represented for her a sense of failure and difficulty in gaining and maintaining employment.

Jenny

Jenny is a thirty-one-year-old woman, who is originally from outside of Ireland. She has a degree and a Masters within the field of communications. Jenny's working life began when she was in school at the age of sixteen. On completion of school Jenny missed deadlines for accessing university and took up employment within the hospitality sector, which she gained through friends. This employment was essential for Jenny to survive financially. Jenny undertook a course in the area of education and training. Jenny has had several jobs in the area of education and training and has also worked in other sectors, such as marketing and administration. Jenny has recently just become unemployed.

Angela

Angela is a forty-six-year-old woman who has a professional qualification which she achieved over ten years ago. She is currently working in the area of management and administration. Angela is a mother and lives in an urban setting. Angela finished her Leaving Certificate and went travelling before returning to Ireland to take up employment, and subsequently decided to commence education on a part-time basis. Juggling study and work became demanding and stressful for Angela, so she decided to withdraw from the course as she wanted to pursue a more structured working life. She moved abroad and worked in the area of finance and business where she gained qualifications in the area of finance. Angela held several part-time positions over the years but has been working full-time for the past few years. Angela has only recently been diagnosed as autistic.

Leah

Leah, lives in an urban area of Ireland. She is forty-three-years old and has two qualifications. She went to college in her late teens and then returned twelve years later as

a mature student. Leah was not officially diagnosed at the time of interview, but later received a formal diagnosis, however, she identified with being autistic at the time of the interviews. Leah took some time out following secondary school and completed some short courses, while also working part-time. While working in the area of hospitality she decided to study in this area and continued working while attending college. Post-college, she worked in several different jobs and travelled abroad. On returning at the age of 30 to embark on a degree in the area of community service and social care. She was very successful at college but struggled in her final year with the completion of her thesis. On graduation, Leah worked part-time within the community sector and secured a job through state support. At the same time, she started a family and took some time out during maternity leave. After her return to work, Leah left her job due to personal difficulties and eventually returned to work a year ago after a long period of time off.

Leah presented her car key. For her this supported her to describe experiences of how she masked to the outside world. The key represented how she struggled to drive for many years and was a huge achievement when she passed her test. People's perceptions of her were that she was very able, but she described how this was a persona, as she masked consistently to the outside world.

Martha

Martha, a qualified translator, lives in a rural area in Ireland. Martha did not have a particular post-school plan: she initially wanted to study in the creative arts sector; however, her family were not keen for her to do so. As a result, she chose a course based on her exam results and on the need to study in a college of a size that suited her preferences. She had little prior knowledge of what the course entailed but was fortunate that the course content, hours, and class size suited her. During Martha's time in college, she began working part-time within the retail sector, however the demands of her part-time job, placed pressure on Martha and her mental health deteriorated. She sought support and it was during this time that, at the age of 21 years, Martha was diagnosed as

autistic. After a period out from college, Martha successfully graduated and embarked on a career of self-employment.

Martha presented a textbook; this facilitated a discussion about the challenges she experienced in her working life.

Alex

Alex recently completed a degree in the area of humanities and social sciences at the age of thirty and is currently considering her future and the prospect of employment. Alex's secondary school experiences were marred by significant difficulties, and as she described she never actually finished secondary education. After leaving school, Alex took a couple of part-time jobs to earn money, but these jobs rarely lasted longer than a day or a week. In her late teens and early twenties, Alex attended postsecondary courses in various colleges of further education, where she gained qualifications, and it was during one of these courses that she was diagnosed as autistic. Alex continued to engage in various post-secondary courses, including college courses, some of which she completed and others she didn't. Alex began working voluntarily for a period of time before returning to university four years ago. Alex was successful during her four years at university and has now graduated.

Alex presented a jug, which facilitated a discussion around masking strategies and how people never see the real Alex.

Brid

Brid is a fifty-three-year-old-woman with a several degrees in the area of education and training. Brid attended university following completion of her secondary schooling. Brid explained that at the time she was challenged by knowing what to study, given that she was not aware of her strengths and challenges and, therefore, studied a course that would enable her to gain employment. On graduation, Brid travelled and later then returned to Ireland where she embarked on a long career within the field of training and education.

Brid held several different positions before taking a career break, due to being physically unwell. After a period, Brid later returned to work in the area of training and education eventually taking up a management role. She also returned to education and completed post-graduate qualifications. After this time, she was diagnosed as autistic. Brid continued to work the area of education and training and later decided to leave these roles and established herself as a freelance, independent worker, in the area of education and training and she has been doing this for the past few years.

Martina

Martina is a forty-three-year-old mother, who lives in an urban area in Ireland. Martina has been a self-employed business owner for over twenty years. Prior to becoming self-employed, Martina worked within the retail sector during secondary school, completing several exams in the field of arts, which was one of her passions and strengths. Upon completion of her Leaving Certificate, which she notes that she did not really study for, she commenced a degree at university in the area of arts and humanities before dropping out and working full-time in the retail sector. She continued to work in retail for several years, before returning to education where she completed a degree in the area of business and finance. In her final year of university, Martina decided that she wanted to work for herself and wanted to utilise her passions and strengths to develop her own personal business. Martina grew and developed her business over the years and in her mid-thirties she became a mother. It was at this time that she experienced difficulties and sought support at which time she was diagnosed as autistic. Martina has continued to develop her business and has diversified her passions in growing her business today.

Ciara

Ciara is a thirty-two-year-old woman, who at the time of the study was working in administration. Ciara has several qualifications, with an undergraduate degree, and several postgraduate diplomas and Master degrees all in the area of arts, and humanities. After leaving school, Ciara was unsure about which direction of further study to take, so she

decided to complete a post-secondary course for two years in the area of personal development. She then entered university and commenced her undergraduate degree. Ciara really enjoyed education and she continued studying for several years, and at certain points in her academic journey, worked in part-time jobs in retail and research. When Ciara completed her second master's degree, she was somewhat unsure as to which direction to go professionally. At that time, she decided to apply for an internship position through a disability employment body recruiting graduates with her area of qualification. Ciara was successful in securing the internship and her post was renewed for a further six-months. Subsequently, Ciara explored new employment opportunities and she was successful in securing a job in another administration body. Ciara has been working in this employment for some time now and has been promoted to different roles within the organisation.

Ciara presented a photograph of her work clothes laid out in preparation for her working day. This facilitated a discussion around how she prepares for work daily by engaging in a nightly ritual of laying out her clothes to prepare her mentally for the next day.

Sarah

Sarah is a thirty-four-year-old woman, living in an urban area in Ireland, with her husband and children. Sarah commenced a degree course in university following her postsecondary education outside of Ireland. She did not complete the course due to financial reasons and returned to Ireland where she took up work, within the retail sector. She continued to work for a year before making the decision to return to complete her Leaving Certificate before entering university. Sarah then undertook a degree in the areas of Arts but had difficulties in her first year with attending lectures and being organised. As a result of these challenges, Sarah sought support from her a number of professionals. She was consequently referred to a public mental health team and was diagnosed as autistic. Sarah's diagnosis was a turning point for her in terms of her ability to understand herself and potential. She returned to complete her Masters degree and was successful, availing of supports from the Disability

Service. Post completion of her degree Sarah took some time out to have a family and began working within the area of education as a trainer. Sarah has worked in several positions within the realm of education and training and continues to work in this area.

This section has presented short descriptive accounts of the twelve women who participated in this study. The next section (Section 4.3) will present the findings from the first interviews.

4.3 Findings from Study One

Four distinct themes were identified as the findings from the analysis of the first interviews. The themes emphasize the varying work journeys of the women to date, this is influenced by the perceptions of difference experienced by the women which impacts on their working lives, together with the need for constant navigation of a world designed for neurotypical individuals. As a result, many of the women experience autistic burnout and this is because of constant navigation, but also further adds to the interconnectedness of influences on the women's work journeys. Figure 4.1 below illustrates the findings of the four themes which capture the experiences of the women's work and journeys from the first interview (Study One).

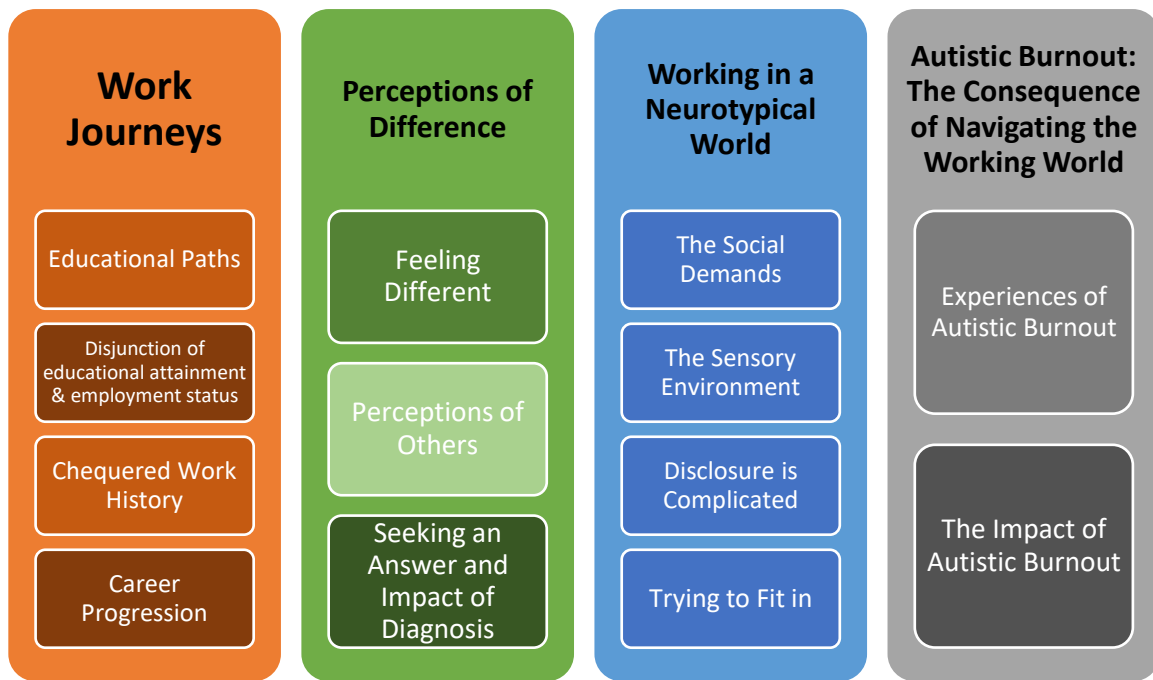


Figure 4.1 Study One Findings: Overview of the Themes

4.3.1 Work Journeys

The world of work is intricate for all individuals to navigate, the stories of these women highlight the women's varied work journeys. Unpacking these narratives revealed that the professional working journeys of the women in the study were intricate and were influenced by their college and past experiences, by work positions held by the women, periods of unemployment and instability and a distinct ambiguity in terms of career direction and progression. Many of the women made conscious decisions throughout their working journeys and this further emphasised the variety of experiences in their working lives and journeys. This is described by the sub-themes presented in the following sections.

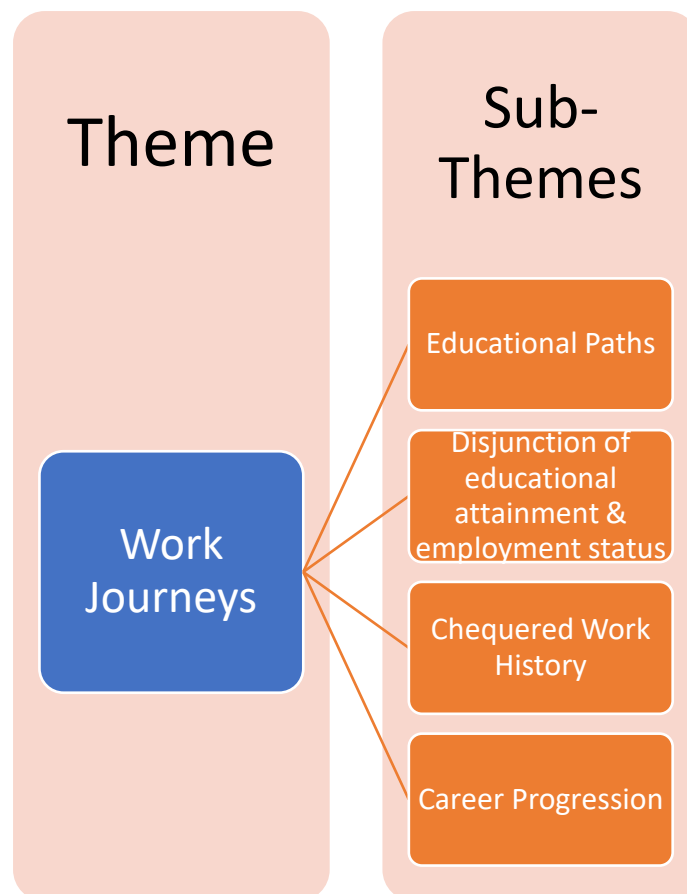


Figure 4.2 Work Journeys and sub-themes

4.3.1.1 Educational Paths

As described at the outset of this thesis, all the women within the study have at some stage across their adulthood participated in higher education and have successfully graduated. Most of the women within the study embarked on further education on completion of secondary school and successfully initiated and pursued a path of employment associated with their college course. For some of the women, their interests drove their course choice. Judith, Jenny, Alex, Angela, and Ciara highlighted how previously held interests supported them in pursuing further education. Judith chooses to study *“maths at university”* because *“it was fun”* and she was *“good at it, really good at it”*. She described herself as a literal and logical person and for that reason, she perceived maths suited her, because *“it’s nice and concrete and clear and logical.”* This positive experience carried through into Judith’s

employment history as she utilised her qualification within the area of technology in her first job following graduation. Angela too having studied in the area of business and finance, pursued employment in this area of work and maintained roles in this sector for several years.

“I suppose my first job in ‘the area of business and finance’ that I was doing for studying as ‘position’. And I worked there from 2005 until 2010, so I worked there for five years. And I had gone in there as an ‘position’... And I went through all my training, and I worked away.” (Angela).

In contrast, some of the women highlighted how their decision to study a course, was not necessarily by choice but suggested and influenced by their families. Brid explained how growing up in the 1980s during a recession impacted on her college course choice and future career, despite wanting to pursue a different path, she explained her rationale for choosing a particular course:

“Because it was a recession at that time too, I thought you study the thing that gets you a job. I was also supremely interested in psychology at that time, but psychology didn’t get you a job back then. So, I didn’t do that. So, I did the thing that was based in a career, and that was based on my values of getting good points in the Leaving Cert, pleasing the family, getting a career.” (Brid).

Martha also had a desire to embark on a different course of study, but was swayed by the influence of her family, which ultimately impacted on her future professional journey:

“I had wanted to do ‘a course in the area of creative arts’ for a while, and I tried to plead with my parents that I was allowed to... do a years’ course... but that didn’t apply. So, there was, I wasn’t told what I had to study but it had to be in ‘name of place’ so that was that.” (Martha).

Despite not choosing her course, Martha’s unfolding and evolving career journey indicated that she persistently continued to pursue employment aligned with her area of study at college. Grace’s past college experience was distinctly different to some of the other women. She explained how she performed academically well in school, as a young child and early teenager, however started struggling academically in her late teens. She

described how she attempted various college courses upon leaving secondary school, however, was unsuccessful at completing third level education in her early adulthood.

“I went to college about, I think, six different times and never made it to either the second term of education or the second year.” (Grace).

Grace recognised that the college courses were not aligned with her interests and motivations but struggled to reach out for any support. After *“a number of years of failing academically”*, Grace embarked on her first step into the world of work in the early 1990s. However, this was also marred with a feeling of failure, as she reported consistently changing and moving between jobs and education. She described an array of avenues of employment and educational courses that she attempted to explore in her twenties and thirties, however, she reported that:

“From the age of eighteen to the age of thirty-six.... twenty years of that, of idling or floating through things.” (Grace).

This had a considerable impact on Grace. She described how she was consistently *“exposed to a situation where you’re constantly failing”* and these past experiences continued to influence her current and future work plans:

“I have no reason to believe anything will work based on my experience...There’s no reason to think this is going to work. This might work for a certain amount of time, a limited amount of time, and then it’s going to not work for a huge amount of time, then you’re going to quit or you’re going to walk out or they’re not going to be happy with you or they’re going to finish your contract, or as soon as your contract is finished you won’t get a reference or they will employ somebody else but not you.” (Grace).

There was a notable pattern of the women returning to education with nine of the twelve women returning to education during their working lives, either engaging in full-time education or returning on a part-time basis. In returning to education, for some of the women this was an attempt to pave a new career direction for themselves. The courses they embarked on were distinctly different from the primary degree or the field of work that they were involved in at that time. Leah, Sally, Jenny, Grace, and Angela had specific desires to change the course of their working journeys. Leah’s decision to return *“to college as a mature student”* at the age of “30” was in an attempt to engage in an area that she

was “*really interested in*” and having experienced life generally, she was able to make decisions based on her personal and professional experiences. Having completed the course, Leah’s working journey initially in the area of hospitality, moved into the realm of community engagement and social care and it redirected her on a different working trajectory. Likewise, Jenny was at the time of interview on the cusp of returning to education, where she planned to complete a course in the area of publishing and marketing.

“I am going to start a course in ‘name of course’ at ‘name of college’ next week, so it’s all going to be online for now, which is great...it’s a six-month course, it’s a level 7 course. And I was thinking maybe it would be interesting for me to work maybe in ‘work area’... So, my hope is that I can work in that field.” (Jenny).

The decision to return to education for Ciara, Judith, and Brid, was driven by a desire to progress in their professional careers. Judith explained her rationale for her return:

“I wanted to get into a job with more ‘technical aspects’ type stuff. And that’s a hell of a lot easier to do with a qualification in the right area. People do go from the area of maths straight into ‘technical’ jobs, but it really helps if you’ve got an actual ‘technical’ course.” (Judith).

Returning to education was also experienced as a protective mechanism, a ‘safety net’:

“In one way kind of college kept me sheltered from a lot of the real world and kind of what’s going on outside.” (Sally).

4.3.1.2 Disjunction of educational attainment and employment status

Educational attainment is recognised as a key determinant of employment outcomes for individuals. Yet, across the narratives of many of the women in the study, there was a misalignment and disjunction between the women’s employment and working role status and their level of education and qualification. Sally, undoubtedly an intelligent young woman with a great passion and desire for learning, proudly described how she was the “*the first person in my family to go to college.*” She successfully graduated from her primary degree in the area of science with an honours qualification. She completed and gained a

qualification in the area of business and finance, and once again returned to college to complete a course in the area of community engagement and social care. In total, Sally had three qualifications, yet as Sally's narrative unfolds, the work that she procured over the course of approximately ten years was not reflective of her educational attainment. She experienced significant periods of underemployment. At the time of the interview, she was working in the area of administration on a part-time basis:

"I'm an administrator which means I look after kind of the smaller things that my colleagues wouldn't necessarily have the time to look after. I make sure that any time we have clients in for meetings that there is fruit and biscuits to offer them, tea, coffee, and I would order stationery every month, whenever it's needed, and I would do a lot of updating of databases. I've done – our filing system is in order now. And today I arranged to get scones for our lunch meeting." (Sally).

This evidence of underemployment and this disjunction transparent in Sally's narrative was further evident in Jenny and Leah's narrative. They both detailed how they pursued education to embark on professional careers, Jenny successfully completed a degree and a masters course, and Leah completed a degree. Yet, they perceived themselves to be "very underemployed" (Jenny) and "way too qualified" (Jenny) for the jobs in which they have engaged in.

"I've been underemployed I think as well because I have two first class honours degrees, but I still have minimum wage jobs." (Jenny).

There was a clear incongruity and disparity between the women's capabilities and the job requirements, leading Jenny to articulate how she felt the need to have a job "that uses my skills" (Jenny):

"It didn't challenge my mind. I don't like it when I can't use my brain. Just sitting there all day makes me feel foggy in my head, and afterwards I can't think. I need some kind of challenge in a way. So, no. They paid me more than other companies, but I can't live my life like that because I'm going to be depressed all day, so I quit." (Jenny).

Leah explained this from an outsider's perspective:

"The low attainment, what you're doing, well not being derogatory about it you're not at the level that people would expect you to be at...I'm under employed for what I should technically be doing." (Leah).

The women highlighted how many “*neurodivergent people*” (Jenny) experience significant levels of underemployment, despite their elevated level of qualifications.

4.3.1.3 Chequered Work History

A tapestry of diverse and varied work experiences was evident across the women’s narratives. This was seen in the multiple job positions held by the women, as well as the frequent reengagement in education as elaborated in the preceding sub-theme, along with intervals of unemployment. Distinctly the women emphasised a sense of fragmentation and this was apparent in all the women’s narratives. Terms such as “*chequered work history*” (Leah), “*randomness*” (Brid), and “*patchworks*” (Jenny) were utilised by the women to evoke these experiences. These sentiments are echoed by the quote from Alex, as she described her journey:

“I haven’t really had a step-by-step journey, that has gone in the right way, so I can’t really say when I finished school, I went to college and then I went to a job. None of that happened... because I have taken like a weird path, a really weird path, a windy path”. (Alex).

These fragmented and “*windy*” (Alex) journeys were accentuated by frequent shifts in working roles. The women discussed how they tended to stay in roles for short periods of time and a sense of longevity is absent from many of their working narratives:

“I think my longevity in a job is three to five years. I can’t stay any longer in a job. If I look at all of my jobs, they’ve all been four years kind of thing, four to five.” (Angela).

This was also similar for Jenny; since completing her college degree, her career path was fragmented with many changes and multiple jobs. Jenny described how she “*jump(ed) around from job to job*.” Less than half of the women (Leah, Jenny, Angela, Sarah, and Ciara) identified a need for “*constant novelty and change*” (Jenny) within their working lives, and this further created chequered work histories for the women as they made decisions to quit and bring about change in their working lives regularly. The pursuit of novelty within their working lives was important for the women, they rejected monotony and repetition.

Leah expressively used the term *“allergic”* to echo this effect. Engaging in the same routine and work tasks for an extended period led to discontentment and was a clear *“push factor”* (Ciara) for Ciara to change positions:

“But I felt in that job if I stayed there, I would be staying there for to do the same thing for years and years and years and not do anything else. And to me that just seemed like a waste. I felt like I was adding value but eventually I got to a point where I was like well I could do much more than this.” (Ciara).

While boredom was also noted as a reason for change in working roles.

“It just made me feel like, I hated the job because I felt I wasn’t doing anything, I was bored shitless.” (Sarah).

Many of the women were contracted to work on short-term contracts. Some of the women secured contracts through the disability recruitment programmes (Sally, Grace, and Ciara) whereby the contracts were often of a six-month duration or year long duration, while others were employed on traditional rolling short-term contracts (Sarah, Jenny, and Leah). These short-term contracts lacked *“stability”* (Grace) for the women, which created a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty. Ciara described it as *“kind of dangling”* (Ciara) and further explained the impact it had on her:

“But again, eventually I started getting a little bit frustrated because first of all I couldn’t get a permanent contract because I was on that kind of temporary contract and then I was on a rolling temporary contract. And that to me was a little bit too much because I could never plan ahead, I felt a little bit...that never really sat with me very well.” (Ciara).

For Jenny, much of her work as a trainer and educator meant she too had been employed on short term contracts. Renewal of these contracts was based on her performance, and she indicated the need to prove herself:

“Like the ‘education and training’ industry is precarious, so you get monthly contracts, fixed term, one month, two months, sometimes six months, and you have to prove yourself all the time, so you get renewed.” (Jenny).

This is precarious for the women and contributes to a sense of vulnerability. Financially, these fixed contracts posed a significant challenge, and required the women to develop future financial plans to manage their lives:

“Because I am on a contract like, I don't know are they going to renew it. I don't think they're going to cut this now... But you know, no one's immune to the cuts but I am conscious of the fact my contract ends in a year and a half, so I need to put some money away.” (Sarah).

The women would have experienced the various changing work contexts in Ireland over the past twenty or more years including highs of the Celtic Tiger boom years which was marked by extensive employment opportunities to the lows of the crash in the late noughties, which catapulted Ireland into employment embargos, to the current day where there is a severe lack of employees for the high number of employment opportunities available. Against this backdrop, some of the women did experience short periods of unemployment (Judith, Jenny, and Alex) scattered across their working lives. While for others, in particular Sally, Leah, and Grace, they experienced longer periods of unemployment. For Grace unemployment was central to her narrative. As she told her story there was a palpable sense of apprehension and discomfort associated with being unemployed for such a substantial proportion of her life:

“I've been unemployed technically since last July but really in my head I've been unemployed since 2009 really.” (Grace).

Grace has had to account for unemployment and her underemployment throughout her life and found it difficult to initialise and re-initialise the process of applying for work, accentuating her unemployed status further:

“I'm struggling to apply for jobs, and I struggled to be proactive in relation to applying for a job throughout my life. Every time I left something; I wasn't really able to put anything out, to reach out for an opportunity.” (Grace).

Sally's narrative also reflected this. She also experienced extended periods of unemployment, resulting in her finding herself in a “*really dark place*”. It was profoundly impacting not only her professional journey but also impacted her mental health. Sally

detailed how she was struggling to garner employment at a period in 2014, she was “receiving all these letters from the Department of Social Protection” asking her to prove that she was actively seeking employment and this externalised pressure impacted on her:

“It was kind of getting to a stage where I was considering kind of harming myself, suicide, because I was out of work for so long.” (Sally).

The women’s fragmented work journeys were characterised by periods of unemployment, instability in working contracts and a lack of continuity in working roles. For many of the women these presented challenges when seeking employment and this was illuminated by the apprehension associated with applying for jobs:

“If you look at my CV... it’s a patchwork. It’s a lot of different things.... I’m a bit of a patchwork kind of person and I found employers, they look at your CV and they give you a weird look, because of course they want stability... I’ve got some sneers also when I went to an interview, like what does your CV look like?” (Jenny).

Sally identified how her lack of work experience was a concern for her and described how she was anxious in the past of how employers would see this:

“I’ve no job like. Employers are going to look at my CV and say you’ve no work experience apart from the ‘Name of institute’ and ‘name of business’, one-year work experience, my entire adult life. And they’re going to say they’ll want somebody, somebody my age should have at least, I don’t know, six/eight years’ experience. I’ve a lot of voluntary experience but does that count.” (Sally).

4.3.1.4 Career Progression

As discussed, most of the women are currently participating in the working world, yet as evident from the preceding sub-theme, some of the women identified that their work paths were chequered. Furthermore, their stories highlighted how they grappled with the development and enhancement of their careers and in having a defined path for their projected future professional working lives. This was present early in their work journeys:

“So, after college I wasn’t sure what I was going to do.” (Ciara).

Martha also discussed how she too *“didn’t have any career ambitions”* for herself in her early adulthood. Jenny was cognisant of this:

“I find it very hard. Some people have this kind of vocation. They’re like, I’m going to be a teacher or I’m going to be a doctor or a lawyer or an architect or engineer, but I don’t have that.” (Jenny).

Some of the women reported how they felt *“directionless”* (Leah) or described how they were *“not being connected”* (Grace), this is typified by Angela’s next quote:

“I feel lost. And sometimes I just think that... When I look back at why and where these gaps are, they can all come from being out of step with... I’m out of step.” (Angela).

They described lacking direction and advice and many of the women, found transitions along the journey difficult, and would have welcomed more support:

“I would like some more signposts on my path... It would be okay if this is how you get a job, and this is how you do it and there is a step-by-step way.” (Alex).

Alex further detailed how being an adult filled her with fear and that the path was even more tricky as *“nobody tells you how to do any of this, ever”*. These sentiments were also echoed by Jenny, as she recalled how she had *“no guidance or somebody telling me this is something you could do, or that is something you could do”*. Martha had a strong desire to advance her career although she reported that she was finding it difficult at this point in her career to establish herself professionally and in developing a professional career path. She had attended Continuous Professional Development courses to assist with this, however, Martha like Jenny and Alex, identified how it can be difficult in *“knowing all the little steps you have to do to get there”* in achieving a career goal. She discussed how a support structure was absent for her career:

“Well, I suppose again as well, it’s on my mind because of the training day I was at, the woman leading it was saying how important it is to have a group of other colleagues that you trust with anything. You know four or five people that you can go to, and they’ll help you improve, and they’ll tell you what you need to work on, and I was so aware that that’s something I don’t have, and I don’t know if I’ll ever have that. So, I suppose that’s probably what I feel is the most challenging.” (Martha).

Making decisions about their working trajectories was seen as a “*struggle*” (Alex). Some of the women referred to instances in their lives where they made very important decisions suddenly and on impulse, which were “*not informed*” (Grace) and they struggled to understand “*why I make them*” (Jenny). Martina described how she did not take the time to “*sit down and write a list of pros and cons fully*” (Martina) when making decisions and this impulsivity is illuminated in Jenny’s quote below:

“I think I’ve made a lot of major life decisions spontaneously. I was just, oh, I’m going to study this, or, oh, I’m going to go to ‘name of city’, I’m going to go to ‘place in Ireland’. I didn’t think a lot. I was just....” (Jenny).

While we see that many of the women had a desire for a more stable career and future working path, Brid, who held a significant managerial level position, and a stable career pathway, made a deliberate choice to leave a job and to become an “*independent worker*” and embarked on doing her “*own thing*”. Within her narrative, the essence behind her decision to deviate from her career trajectory was revealed, it was not only due to concerns around “*micro pressures*” of the job, issues with the “*physical nature of the office*” (which will be discussed further in the sub-theme; *The Sensory Environment*), but also because of “*ethical reasons*” and a dislike for how the organisation was being run. Her values played an important role in her decision making:

“I didn’t like the way the organisation was going... It was just about blocking everything, turning it into paperwork and everything being quango-ised and nobody being responsible for anything. So, I was getting a bit fed up.” (Brid).

4.3.1.5 Summary of Work Journeys

The findings presented within this theme have highlighted that the working lives of these twelve autistic women are varied, and multifaceted. Many of the women in this study experienced chequered work journeys and careers. For some of the women their work journeys were influenced by their past experiences, including their college experience and course choice, as well as previous employment choices. In addition, there was a clear disjunction between many of the women’s educational attainment and the job status that they held; these women were highly educated but some were working in low-paid jobs and

were deemed 'underemployed'. Almost all the women experienced unemployment across their working journeys. Many struggled to negotiate and develop a working career, as they grappled with finding a direction for themselves and for others their values and needs did not match their role and hence the women quit work and moved onto another job or made a conscious decision to return to education. The intricacy of navigating and negotiating through the professional landscape of work for these women was shaped by various factors and was further compounded and influenced by the perceptions of difference which the women experienced, as well as the constant negotiation these women were required to do because the working world was designed for neurotypicals, this will be discussed in the subsequent themes which follow.

4.3.2 Perceptions of Difference

This section presents the findings as they relate to the women's subjective experiences of their sense of self, distinctly how they felt different. It further extends the discussion on how the women's work experiences were impacted by other people's perceptions of them and described how this both positively and negatively impacted on the women and their work experiences. It also includes the findings related to, how, for some of the women, they sought answers to their sense of feeling different and sought an autism diagnosis, this was experienced as both a positive and negative impact on their working journeys.

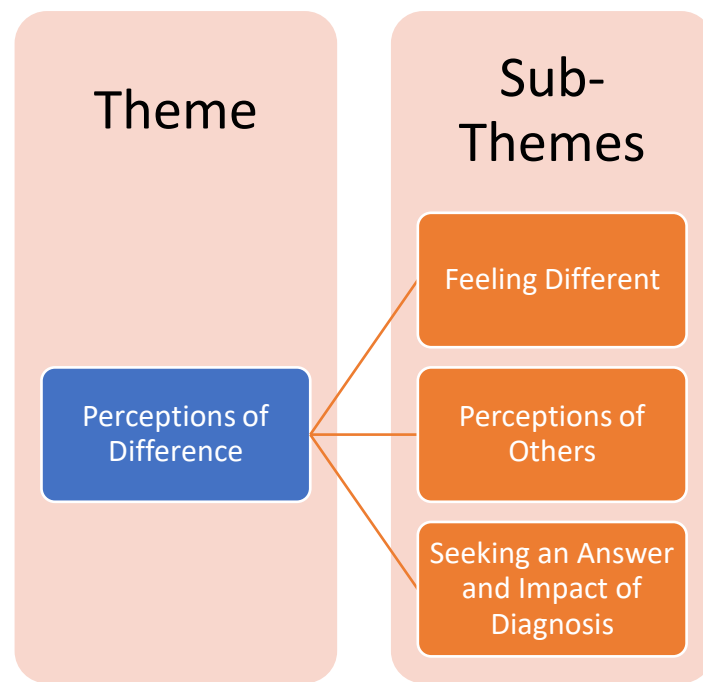


Figure 4.3 Perceptions of Difference and sub-themes

4.3.2.1 Feeling Different

Within all the women's narratives there was evidence of their sense of feeling and of being different. This was expressed with each of the women using several different words while referring to, and describing, themselves. They often assigned themselves to negative stereotypes utilizing words such as "awkward" (Judith), "weirdo" (Jenny), "bonkers" (Angela), "weird" (Sally and Alex), and "abnormal" (Ciara). This growing sense of feeling different started for many of the women in their early childhood. Sally described her early experiences in school and the perception that she holds of her younger self.

"I suppose growing up really, I didn't really fit in, I didn't really make friends. I was that child who sat in the corner on my own. I had imaginary friends, I talked to myself, I was a bit weird that way." (Sally).

This recollection was common amongst the other participants. Alex also explained a point in her childhood when she distinctly felt this sense of difference:

"Between the ages of maybe 12 and 17, maybe earlier, I'm not sure but I would have like become super aware of being different." (Alex).

Judith described this in terms of trying to fit in with a group and trying to be more confident than she really was:

"I guess maybe that typical difficult teenage girl, clique school, bleurgh. I mean, I guess I was pretending to be a bit more confident and trying to be a bit less awkward, a bit less anxious, trying to fit in with people." (Judith).

The women acknowledged that the significant attempts to try to fit in, as a result of feeling different continued into their working lives. Feeling the need to fit in frustrated the women, however they felt the need to do this and made a conscious decision to try and counteract their sense of difference. However, evidently, we understand that this was difficult for them. Leah and Martina highlighted this, and their reflections resonate with the tensions inherent across the stories told by the women in the study:

"I don't know how to be included or make myself be included... Neurotypical society. I've never fit in, even when I was trying really hard to fit in. I've never quite..." (Leah).

"I have done 41 years at that point of trying to fit in." (Martina).

Judith further typified her sense of feeling different to being *"a little bit odd"* but highlighted how this difference did not significantly impact on her within higher education because she perceived that there was in her opinion *"enough odd people"* in the academic arena and felt safe within this environment. Although she felt safe, she still made significant comparisons of herself to others. She explained how some academic activities were stressful for her, these included group work, presentations, and her thesis. She referred to these activities as being *"pretty tough"* and explained how she found these more difficult than *"your average people do"*. This comparison of self to others continued to permeate through her work narrative, as she described how she benchmarked herself against others:

"I was struggling with things or evidently finding them more difficult than other people did, I thought, well, that's stupid. They can do it, so can you. Yeah, don't be stupid, get on with it kind of. Just push yourself a bit harder. I'm sure it's fine. Yeah, so I was gradually having to push myself harder and harder until I managed to do the same amount of work." (Judith).

The perception of negative difference was apparent across the women's narratives, and particularly for Grace, Sally, Martha, Alex, Sarah, and Jenny. They described situations where they felt that they had not achieved as much in their lives in comparison to their peers. Often the women measured themselves against 'normative' life goals and in particular regarding their work journey and career:

"I'm also extremely ashamed because I have friends who got a job from graduating in 2016 who are managers and got a job at 32k as they got out. I mean, it took them six months to get the job, to find a job, and they were the best people of the course, so I don't think anybody got something as good as they did. But they progressed. And once again, this is another example of me completely stalling and standing still and people moving on with their life and progressing their career and stuff like that. Pretty much for the same reasons every time. So, this is where I am." (Grace).

In addition, to this comparison of themselves to others, some of the women also reported how they lacked confidence in themselves and in their abilities. Sarah described her feelings of inadequacy and perceived shortcomings as she detailed a time in her life when she was attending counselling support:

"I remember writing down a page of stuff before I went in (to a counselling appointment) of all the things that were wrong, like with me, like I can't do this and I'm bad at this and whatever." (Sarah).

A sense of perceived consistent failure is evident across Grace's narrative where she described how she has only had a *"handful of experiences when she was successful"*. She described herself as a *"failure"* and *"dysfunctional"* with an *"inability to cope"* and *"adapt"*. The next quote accentuates this self-doubt:

"I'm not managing to find those opportunities and I'm not sure if they exist, so I kind of feel that it's me as a person who's failing. And certainly, that's also true in my personal life because I'm not able to make friends, I'm not developing relationships, so I don't have even a support network of friends who can tell me otherwise that they like me regardless or talk me out of it. I don't have that either because I'm not creating those real connections." (Grace).

The narratives of the women, in particular Judith, Sally, Martha, Ciara, and Jenny demonstrated that the women felt the need to push themselves out of their comfort zone and to consistently improve themselves as working women. They made these decisions and felt this need to measure up, and to compensate for their perceived lack of confidence in their abilities. This is evident in the narratives of the women from their experience in college right into their working lives. Sally highlighted how despite her sense of feeling different, she in the past, wanted to push beyond the barriers created by perceptions of differences:

"So, I grew up kind of thinking, no I don't want to be that. I just want to push myself all the time." (Sally).

Martha's need for development came in the form of enhancing and improving herself:

"One of the courses I picked is much harder. So, I pushed myself to do a much more difficult work and I am doing a lot more one-offs like 'Will you do cover on such and such or blah, blah, blah'. So, I have been doing a lot more of those. I am going to a lot more CPD training sessions... As I said the first two years have been very quiet, but this is the first year, I am trying to push myself and do more professionally." (Martha).

Ciara explained why she felt a need to improve herself. She was consistently striving to further educate herself and push herself professionally to advance her career. Ciara is a well-educated young woman with a full-time position in a high-powered role, however, she explained how she lacked the "trust" in herself and as a result felt a persistent need to continuously better herself. The quote below highlights her struggles, despite her high attainment of achievements and qualifications:

"I feel like I need to push myself because stagnation would not be to me useful. I need to continually improve... I'm sure there are some that are more challenging than others but at the moment I would say I'm glad that I've tried. I've pushed myself out of my comfort zone again. I don't feel I need to push myself out of my comfort zone anymore because again I'm in a new role and it's developing me and it's pushing me to do different things, different skills, using different abilities and I don't know when I'll stop testing my ability to do stuff. I don't know when I'll trust myself that I'll be fine." (Ciara).

Through this comparison of self to others and having to continuously push themselves the women experienced multiple emotions. The complex interplay of comparison of self to others and feeling the need for self-improvement, brought an emotional toll on the women which was expressed as guilt and disappointment in themselves. Jenny stated:

"I think the most important thing, which I don't like to do, is to accept that maybe sometimes I can't do many things. I always make myself feel very guilty if I don't work on projects or whatever or do something productive." (Jenny).

Like Jenny, Angela described times when she berated herself for what she saw as her perceived shortcomings, leading to the emergence of strong internalised negative beliefs:

"My core beliefs of myself aren't, they're not positive core beliefs... I never see that there's a positive in me." (Angela).

These emotions detailed by the women had a significant impact on the women's sense of self and their self-worth. For Ciara, she experienced strong feelings of shame and vulnerability:

"That feeling of, I'm not good enough... it's an awful feeling, shame, it's a feeling of, making yourself vulnerable, but also feeling that you might be lacking as well. So, you're putting yourself out there, knowing that you are vulnerable, you're making yourself more vulnerable, and also potentially showing people something that you don't like about yourself. So, shame is a horrible feeling, it's a really grotty, icky feeling.... And if you want to know how it feels to me, it feels like something in the pit of your stomach, and it can come with an awful lot of ruination and distress. And it is, it's something to do with feeling lacking, and feeling like there's a potential for you to be judged or ostracised based on it." (Ciara).

The women's internalised perceptions of difference and *"not being accepted"* (Martina) resulted in some of the women feeling that they were excluded and marginalised, in their early lives at school and within their work settings. Jenny used the term *"feeling alien"* as she described her experiences, this highlighted her perception of herself as an outsider to the dominant norms of her work environment.

"This kind of feeling alien from people. Like I find it hard to make connections with many people, or deeper connections.... I often feel like I don't belong in any group." (Jenny).

Similarly, Angela and Martha described themselves as being an *"imposter"* within their workplaces. It was clear from Angela's narrative that she persistently doubted her abilities and was fearful of being exposed as a fraud, which is also common to Grace's narrative, where she used the term *"fraud"* to describe herself.

"And what I mean by that is there's always been a fear within all of these jobs that I've had, in all of my life, that that imposter syndrome kind of thing is coming up. That like I'm not good enough for this...I find I'm in a job now where I feel like I'm a complete imposter and I shouldn't be in the job, and I shouldn't be getting paid what I'm getting paid to do the job I'm doing because I don't really know absolutely anything about it. And I just have no confidence in what's in my head." (Angela).

4.3.2.2 Perceptions of Others

The women's day to day working lives were influenced by the individuals they encountered. The women, as discussed above, had an internalised perception of their own differences and this affected their sense of self and how they perceived how they fit within the working world. This was further exacerbated by the women's perceptions of others towards them and distinctly how they considered others to view them as *"different"* (Leah). This was present in the narratives they shared, as they discussed aspects of their childhood:

"I think the way other children treated me let me know that I was different. Not necessarily anything that anybody specifically said to me. It wasn't, you're really strange or you're really odd or you're a weirdo. It was just the way that they treated me." (Leah).

The women recalled situations whereby their sense of being and feeling different was unmistakably reinforced by subtle and potentially unintentional acts made by people around them:

"It mightn't be people actually saying stuff to you, but it might just be you pick up on people not being comfortable around you or just treating you different to other people." (Martina).

Like Martina, Angela and Leah described feeling unnoticed by colleagues within their workplaces:

"I just feel that I'm not... I'm invisible and I'm not heard." (Angela).

And for Leah, this manifested in feelings of exclusion:

"I get invited to the staff night out and stuff and the Christmas, it was kind of like an afterthought like, oh yeah, do you want to come along, sort of thing? Rather than like you know that kind of way if there's anything going on it's kind of like, 'Oh, Leah, would you like to come?' but everybody else already knows about it, everybody else has already been invited... There is obviously something there with me that people go, 'Oh yeah, I didn't think of her.'" (Leah).

The women also explicitly experienced being treated differently by people around them at work. Alex in her narrative, explained how she was described by others as *"aloof"* and *"a bit of a conundrum"* (Alex). Angela explained how she was *"labelled as difficult, because I didn't do things the way they did things"*. Some of the women also highlighted how they perceived people's actions towards them, Jenny explained how she *"think(s) that people can be very harsh with some people who are a bit different"*. Angela provided incidents of how people within her current role negatively influenced her belief in herself and this is depicted by the quote below, where she described the response, she received from her manager after writing a report:

"Every single report I sent back was covered in red marks, like I was in school. And it was awful. It really affected my belief in myself, because I'm like 'Is anything I do good enough?'" (Angela).

Overt exposure to negative perceptions from others, was evident in the re-telling of Leah's experience in a past working position. Leah explained *"how they treated me badly because I was different"*. In her reflection of this experience, Leah became visibly and physically upset, which highlighted the seriousness and impact of this incident on her:

"My boss called me into the office, and she chastised me and told me that I had talked over people... I had probably made everybody else feel really uncomfortable. All the things that I had said to myself about myself, she brought up. Sorry, getting a bit upset. But yeah, it was really difficult. It was really difficult to hear. Do you know what I mean? It was all the negative stuff that I thought about myself just put into concrete form.... So, to have a boss kind of tell you all the things that are... All the things that you're hoping nobody else has noticed."
(Leah).

Ciara explained how she has felt confined and restricted within past employment based on pessimistic outlooks by others:

"I wonder implicitly was it limiting me where I was because they were kind of like oh, we can't give her too much or we can't stress her out too much..." (Ciara).

Grace recalled scenarios across her working life which were reminiscent of the past negative experiences she encountered as a child:

"This comes from childhood as well, not being listened to and being shut down and then learning not to speak up and learning not to ask for help because you won't get it and your parent might say they don't have time or they're getting annoyed that you're asking for help. So, sometimes I'm expecting that anger.... like that girl got angry at me like for no reason. I suppose experiencing some kind of violence whether it's anger or not or a disagreement even is a form of violence. So, the person might not get angry at you but maybe blame you for something and I'm experiencing that as a violence... I was dismissed as a volunteer, the fact that some people say remove you from the situation.... So, whether they actually are voicing or articulating anger or disagreement or that you are experiencing it as a result of it is for me kind of the same thing. I just, for me it's like oh here's another time."
(Grace).

For many of the women the expectations of others in their lives had a considerable impact on them. Leah, Judith, Sally, and Grace recalled times where they felt external pressures to meet the expectations of others. For some of the women this was people explicitly verbalising their opinions. Sally recollected a phase in her life when she was unemployed and participated in voluntary activities and her family members commented on her work status:

"I was under pressure from my family as well and people around me saying to me, what are you doing with yourself now? Aren't you bored sitting at home all day? Oh, it's great that you're getting out but get a real job now, don't be doing that volunteer work anymore. And it really knocked me in a way." (Sally).

Moreover, Leah described discussions with friends during which they identified their perceived expectations of her.

"I have friends who've talked to me about, 'But you could do other stuff and you could set this up and you could do all this, and you have all this experience, you should set up your own place, you could get this', and I just can't. Like the thing is what people don't realise is that when they say that to me that's a demand and it makes me extraordinarily anxious. I can't, I can't do it because somebody's, I know it seems stupid. I know it seems really ridiculous but the minute somebody says to me, 'You should do this', my whole body goes eh no, I can't, I can't." (Leah).

Evident from these accounts was the additional level of stress that this placed on the women. Their stories highlighted how they often felt judged by others, and they were concerned by how they perceived their colleagues to see them. They appeared to be hypervigilant to the reactions of others and were fearful that they would be found out by their colleagues for not being "good enough" (Brid) or of "outing" (Leah) themselves as being different:

"I mean, I always felt I wasn't good enough. I'd be found out for not being the good enough person that I was... There's all that stuff going on about, ... my nervousness about what other people, how they're going to perceive things." (Brid).

For Martha her work community was relatively small, and her colleagues tended to know and be familiar with each other. Martha's concern and anxiety was how others judged her based on her past:

"It is still difficult now because everyone knows everybody. I still bump into people who saw how unwell I was and now, in a professional environment, trying to be professional and knowing they know that about me, that is difficult." (Martha).

Despite the perceived negative perceptions of others and their own sense of self influencing the women's work experiences, Brid highlighted how other's perceptions did counteract the negativity and positively influenced her. In the next quote by Brid, it was evident that despite experiencing negative perceptions of herself and feeling this from others around her, Brid utilised feedback and other's perceptions to benchmark and validate herself. In this statement, it was evident that other's perceptions were important to a certain degree and identified the significant positive impact in this instance on her self-esteem and self-worth regarding her working role:

"I'd be found out for not being the good enough person that I was, which is probably why I'm very – generally regarded as a good worker and it's usually only when I'm leaving and they write the lovely reviews, because I suppose I have that need for affirmation from other people because of not knowing really where I stand myself." (Brid).

Throughout the women's narratives it was clear that there was a dynamic relationship between the self-perceptions of difference experienced by the women and other's perceptions on them, such as the scrutiny of others and their exposure to adverse perceptions and experiences which influenced and impacted the women's working lives.

4.3.2.3 Seeking an Answer and Impact of Diagnosis

For many of the women their feelings of difference and never fitting in were connected to confusion and self-doubt, as they grappled to understand their unique experiences without a clear understanding of the underlying reasons for these feelings. Martina and Alex described this sense of not knowing why they felt different leaving them with lingering questions about their identity. Analogies are used by some of the women to express this:

"There's always these kinds of unfinished breadcrumb trail in my mind of just different things that happened over my life I think, you know, at all different ages. Like you know, where kind of like there wasn't an answer for it, like why did that happen, why did that happen, why did that happen? Not understanding these things." (Martina).

"I always knew I was different, but I never really had any – not that you get manuals or anything but any kind of – ... it's like before that I was working off the idea that I was a petrol car, and I was doing all the things to keep my petrol car maintained well, but it turns out I'm a diesel car so lots of those things don't work." (Alex).

Seeking an answer was a drawn-out period of uncertainty for all but one of the women (Alex), with a formal diagnosis of being autistic not being made until their twenties', thirties, and forties. Thus, the women navigated much of their working lives without knowing that they were autistic:

"I only know I'm autistic for the last five years. So, I've gone through most of my working career not knowing." (Brid).

This not knowing exacerbated their challenges:

"Wondering why I struggled with all these things that other people didn't seem to. Particularly like work interactions with people, phone calls, or just reading people. And just wondering why the whole kind of physical crash thing, why I burned myself out in 2012. What made things so much harder for me that I couldn't do them?" (Judith).

There were multiple reasons why the women in the study sought out an answer in the form of a diagnosis. For many it was personal challenges associated with their college and working lives that led them to go down the diagnostic route. Sally's experience echoed some of the stories told by some of the other women in the study, including Judith, Grace, and Sarah. She started her interview by discussing this experience and described the difficulties she experienced in securing an internship during her time in college. Despite being good on paper, with *"a great CV... involved in extracurricular activities... one of the top students in the class"* (Sally), she reported that she struggled at the interview stage and was unsuccessful in securing an internship. This led her to question why she was struggling and, as a result, she sought out advice and help within the university. It was at this point that she explored autism:

"Because I had my own kind of suspicions for a very long time about myself." (Sally).

Some of the other women described how they sought a diagnosis for other reasons, Jenny wanted to explore taking medication as she had suspicions that she was autistic following challenges in navigating work and her personal life.

"I wanted to try out medication." (Jenny).

Grace and Ciara wanted a diagnosis to seek out additional support in managing day-to-day life tasks. For Brid and Martina, it was an avenue to confirm why they were experiencing their feelings and their struggles.

"For really practical reasons, you know, I could have gone through life just thinking maybe... So, I thought I need to have my own reason for this and that's why I went and got the label." (Brid).

This array of motivations for seeking a diagnosis illustrated the multifaceted and unique experiences held by the women to better understand themselves and their experiences.

The women extensively discussed the impact of their diagnosis on both their personal and working lives. There was a clear before and after diagnosis experience across all the women's stories, with a palpable sense of transformation in their narratives when answers were found to long standing questions that existed about their identity and their experiences. This was described as *"lightbulb"* (Martha) and *"a-ha moments"* (Leah). For many of the women (Brid, Judith, Alex, Martina, Sarah, Grace, and Leah) it proved to be a unifying explanation for aspects of their past.

"Because of having my diagnosis of autism, I went on a great journey of discovery of myself and forgiveness of myself for things that went wrong, and things that went right and understanding of myself." (Brid).

Leah's understanding of her diagnosis allowed her to have a new lens by which to view her past and afforded her the opportunity to revisit past situations with a sense of empathy and compassion for herself:

"It has been healing in a lot of ways, Because I said, being able to look back and forgive myself for some of the difficulties I had." (Leah).

Judith re-framed many of her work experiences through her newfound understanding of her autistic identity and this supported her, as she saw it as a *“form of treatment”* (Judith) and an explanation and a reason for *“struggling with certain things”*. She also identified how the diagnosis offered an explanation to share with others, to counteract their level of expectation:

“The thing for me really was explaining it to other people. Kind of, people believed that I wasn’t making it up. It was kind of, because I’d gone from, I was kind of a high-achiever at school, like academically I did pretty well in most subjects and you know, I was conscientious, I worked hard. It was kind of assumed by me and everyone else that this would continue into work and career and stuff and the fact that I kind of crashed and burned out of working after three or four years was kind of a bit disappointing, I guess. It was kind of, that’s not what Judith does, Judith is a high achiever like.” (Judith).

In contrast to the narratives and viewpoints of the other women, Sally, Jenny, and Ciara, emphasised their reluctance to fully embrace their autistic identity and to a certain degree rejected it, as they did not wish to be categorised and pigeonholed. Sally rejected the notion of being labelled disabled:

“No, no, I don’t need that, I’m not disabled, I don’t need any of that.” (Sally).

While for Jenny, a sense of rejection of the deficit perspective was evident.

“I don’t even feel like I want to have a diagnosis, because I feel it’s not an illness. I don’t want to be diagnosed. I’m just a person.... I don’t think another person needs to tell me what I am— I don’t want anything; I don’t want this kind of language in my life.” (Jenny).

However, even though they were hesitant to accept what they perceived as an ‘autism label’ both Jenny and Ciara, viewed the diagnosis as a *“necessary evil”* (Ciara) to access the support they needed. The next quote by Ciara highlights this argument:

“Getting a diagnosis to me – and I would say this to everyone as well, it’s a necessary evil. Sometimes diagnoses are very important because it gives people the ability to have a narrative and a label, and that makes sense for their world. It wasn’t like that for me. I kind of probably already knew I had autism, that wasn’t

the problem. I needed support in order to move forward and in Ireland getting a diagnosis is the only way you can kind of access additional supports. So, that's why I did it and that kind of moved me on slowly and steadily towards going to another course and then going to my third course and then getting into a job."
(Ciara).

While some of the women expressed a preference for rejecting the 'label', they acknowledged its usefulness in accessing support. Specifically, Sally, Ciara, Grace, and Judith availed of disability recruitment programs to secure employment which meant their employment was obtained through the recognition of their autism diagnosis. Sally's working journey illustrates this, she initially struggled to secure an internship during her college course. However, following graduation from college, Sally accessed a disability-specific internship employment programme leading to a successful six-month contract within an organisation. She continued to use these access and support programmes and systems in subsequent years. Judith's diagnosis was a turning point in her work story. Before her diagnosis, she grappled with understanding past work-related challenges. After receiving her diagnosis, Judith successfully secured employment through a disability recruitment agency which led her to maintain employment:

"I mean, without my diagnosis, I wouldn't – especially as you require a diagnosis before they will help you, so I wouldn't have the job that I have or... I probably wouldn't have any job without 'Name of Recruitment Agency' and I wouldn't have 'Name of Recruitment Agency' without my diagnosis. So, obviously that's made a massive impact to my life." (Judith).

Exploring and navigating their newfound autistic identities motivated three of the women, Sarah, Brid, and Martina, to allow sections of their careers to be situated within the field of autism. Martina's narrative highlighted how autism has become the driving force for her business:

"Teaching's actually a part of... or a big part of who I am or I suppose what makes me tick. So, learning all the stuff I learned about Autism is only kind of natural for me to share it if that makes sense, you know. I'm sure lots of people just you know, go get diagnosed, go off and learn the stuff and keep it all to themselves. Just go off and live their own life. Whereas I'm like, I need to tell everybody all of this stuff

that I know now and that I found out. So yeah, I suppose that's actually kind of just a logical natural step for me to do." (Martina).

Many of the women referred to how they wished they had learned about their identity much earlier in their lives, as their working roles *"would have been a lot easier"* (Brid). Leah elucidated how her lack of knowledge regarding her autistic identity affected her mental health:

"My only regret is that I didn't know earlier.... I don't think I would have got as depressed. I don't think I would have struggled as much as I did. I just felt like a failure. I felt like I'd really failed." (Leah).

4.3.2.4 Summary of Perceptions of Difference

This theme presented how both the women's self-perception and the perception and influence of others played a crucial role in shaping their work experiences. Many of the women in their narratives described a distinct sense of feeling different from others. They described their internalised perceived sense of difference and negative self-perceptions in a working world dominated by neurotypical individuals. For many of the women this was tied to their past experiences and early life memories as they felt this growing sense of difference from childhood. This feeling and sense of difference was exacerbated by the fact that the women struggled to understand why they felt different, typified by the words they used to describe themselves often assigning themselves to negative stereotypes. The women were late diagnosed and were not aware of their autistic identity often until well into their working careers. The women tended to compare themselves to others and often benchmarked themselves and their achievements to fellow colleagues or past classmates. In comparing themselves to others, and in their distinct perception of difference, the women felt that they never fitted in within neurotypical society. This was further emphasised by the women's perceptions of the views of others and their negative past work experiences. Many of the women recounted their experiences of pushing themselves to fit in due to perceived expectations of society on them. For some of the women past negative work experiences created a deep sense of failure and lack of confidence in

themselves. On learning of their autistic identity, we saw that some of the women were concerned with how they were perceived within the workplace. For some of the women they rejected this 'difference' and new identity, concerned at how others would perceive their autistic identity and limit them within the workplace. While for others, they embraced this autistic identity and availed of supports to assist them finding and securing employment. For some, seeking this answer in the form of a diagnosis was a turning point in their work story.

4.3.3 Working in a Neurotypical World

The women's narratives described how they were navigating a working world that is "*not working for autistic people*" (Brid). An accumulation of situations in a working world designed for neurotypical individuals created barriers for the women, which they needed to negotiate and manage on a day-to-day basis. There are four sub-themes; *The Social Demands*, *The Sensory Environment*, *Disclosure is complicated* and *Trying to Fit in* and this highlights some of the perceived barriers and challenges experienced by the women, as they navigated their professional working lives.

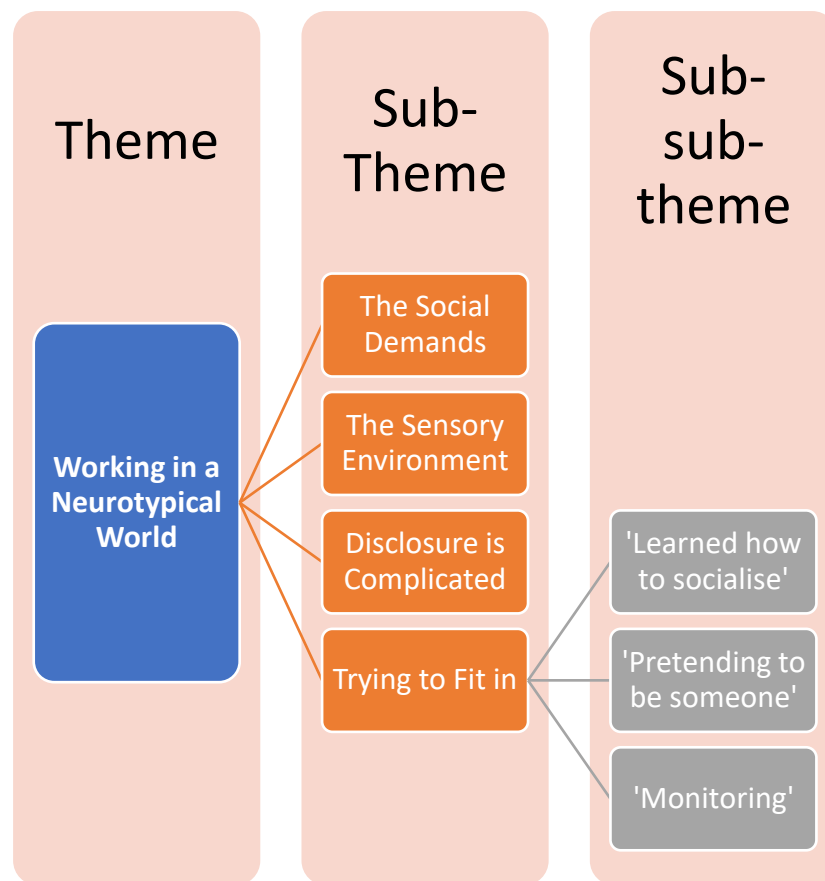


Figure 4.4 Working in a Neurotypical World and sub-themes

4.3.3.1 The Social Demands

All the women described how their different socio-cognitive processing styles posed challenges for them as they navigated the working world. The challenges they shared traversed all stages of the employment and work journey, including application stage, interview process and within their work environments.

Securing employment can often be through an established social network, which can support a person to gain employment through their connections of past colleagues and friends. Four of the women (Leah, Sally, Grace, and Martha) described how this was a particular barrier for them and impacted them in gaining employment:

“I’m not the best at kind of keeping in touch with people. Not the best at networking and making connections at job fairs or handing out a business card. It’s all about those little things, the networking, social capital.” (Sally).

Further to this, securing work was seen as requiring social interaction and engagement with employers and human resources at the outset to follow-up. Leah described the effects of these expectations on her:

“That whole having to chase and having to ring and having to, I physically find that extremely difficult. I find it really, really difficult. So, therefore I would send in my CV. I would follow the rules of the application, whatever the thing was and if I didn’t hear back, I didn’t hear back, I didn’t go chasing it. So, and I think that was part of the reason why I found it difficult to find work because I wasn’t doing that whereas other people would. Other people would have chased it up and would have, you know. You need to let them know who you are, and you need to go, blah blah blah.... I wouldn’t come across well if I did walk into a ‘workplace’ or anything like that to hand in my CV I would come across like, ugh, just really shy and uncomfortable and blah.” (Leah).

The women attributed their challenges at the interview stage to the perceived necessity, pressure, and expectation for social interaction via “face-to-face” (Leah) engagement. Several of the women (Judith, Brid, Leah, Ciara, and Alex) highlighted this as a barrier experienced by the wider autistic community:

“Autistic people simply cannot get through the interview situation... because it involves connection with other people, it can be hard to do.” (Brid).

The social component of interviews elicited feelings of discomfort and distress. Judith described interviews as an “anxiety inducing process”, while others used words such as “hate” (Ciara), “nervous” (Brid) and “uncomfortable” (Grace). The perceived expected social and communicative gestures and nuances, was identified as challenging:

“I struggled a lot just even with handshakes, greeting someone at the door to say hello, nice to meet you... Having kind of facial expressions, kind of conveying the right amount of interest, because sometimes I do, I did get a bit kind of monotone when I spoke and even kind of my facial expressions can be a bit monotone sometimes. I think. I’m not necessarily sure what kind of I look like in terms of

kind of facial expressions, or hand gestures, or... you know, what's the right thing to do." (Sally).

The women identified how, within interviews, there is a perceived expectation to portray oneself in the most positive way, ensuring that one does not "down-sell" (Grace) themselves. However, this did not sit naturally for some of the women, who identified a need to be completely "honest" (Angela) about their skills, abilities, and previous experiences:

"I find I'm not a good liar. I'm not able to lie. I go really, really, really red and I start to speak really fast. My heart pounds. I know that... I feel like everybody knows that I'm telling a fib... I can't say I've done something if I haven't done it. I have to be a million percent honest about it." (Angela).

They struggled with elaborating:

"I wasn't able to waffle my way through and say, yeah, I did – I was practically running the office while I was there, the way another candidate would." (Sally).

There was a clear sense that the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012), where there was mismatch in communication between parties, existed within the world of work for these women. This was exacerbated through differences in the comprehension of language and body language during social interactions. Judith, Grace, and Jenny referred to how they experienced difficulties processing social information during communication:

"I do find the whole process of kind of, like processing what someone said to you, working out what they mean, working out what I react to that, working out what I think, turning that into words can sometimes be a slightly laborious process. Like I don't quite process words or people's body language or expressions quite as quickly as your average person does... It just means that I end up not saying things that I should have said, sometimes. Or being rushed into saying the wrong thing." (Judith).

Jenny explained how she "spills" information in what was perceived to be an inappropriate manner by others and explained a workplace scenario, where potentially there was difficulty in understanding hidden meanings:

“Often spill information that I’m not supposed to tell another person, but I didn’t know it was secret. So, somebody gossips about someone, and I just go to them and say, hey, this person said you should do this, why don’t you do it? And for me, that’s a fix because they were complaining about some small thing for a month instead of just telling the other person to stop. But of course, I told them some secret and then it’s a huge problem...” (Jenny).

Providing feedback to others can result in miscommunication:

“But I feel like what's the point of asking for feedback if it's like 10% of what you actually can provide. Like you know, especially if you've thought about it that much. So, I was like okay, so this is the perfect example of when people ask me for something, they expect something. I expect something else, and I give them even more than what I was expecting to give. And that usually leads to breakdown of communication right there and then because people are overwhelmed by it, probably offended by it. Some people get angry. And you know, and this is where it ends.” (Grace).

As a result of some negative past experiences associated with mutual misunderstandings, some of the women (Leah, Sarah, and Angela) described their uneasiness around social interactions at work and their concerns for a negative response from others during these occasions:

“Realising halfway through a sentence or halfway through a big spiel about something that 1) the person isn’t interested and 2) I’ve said something, somewhere to kind of annoy them... Like, constantly, that feeling of constantly putting your foot in it....I do, I put my foot in it all the time. Because I don’t realise that I’m putting my foot in it or I’ve said something in a way that wasn’t the way it should be said.” (Leah).

Sarah expressed apprehension about appearing improper:

“Like is asking this person this thing appropriate or are they going to think I'm rude? Or is it okay to ring this person and say look, we haven't got this yet? Like all of those things I would think about and then not doing anything because I'm like I don't want to fuck it up.” (Sarah).

The women were worried for fear of criticism, because they have been reprimanded in the past for saying the wrong thing within the workplace, as Angela explained:

“I recall being called into the office one day because I was told I was too outspoken.” (Leah).

In navigating the working world, the women referred to how they not only managed the interactions within their work environments but had to negotiate social events:

“It’s like if I go on a staff night out.. That kind of environment where everyone was making small talk and I was just like, I don’t know what to say, I don’t know how to think, and then I’d blurt in on something way too personal... I also know that when I do go out to these work night outs I’m really awkward, I’m super awkward, I kind of either sit there not really talking because I don’t know what to talk about, to say, or somebody says something and I latch onto it and waffle away about it in far too much detail for 10 to 15 minutes or disclose far too much information that they don’t want.” (Leah).

The women in the study faced a considerable challenge in managing the social experience and aspect of work. This was not necessarily due to their perceived shortcomings, but rather it was influenced and impacted by the lack of understanding and approach by others that they faced within their work environments.

4.3.3.2 The Sensory Environment

This sub-theme identifies how the sensory environmental aspects of the workplace influenced and shaped the women’s engagement and participation in their working roles. The narratives from all the women underscored how these sensory elements could be perceived to *“be completely invisible to other people”* (Brid) but strongly impacted the women given that they were *“more sensitive”* (Martina) to these aspects of the workplace. They highlighted how factors such as *“noise”* (Brid), *“lights”* (Ciara) and *“the humidity of the air”*, *“the temperature”* and, *“smells”* (Jenny) were *“disabling”* for them, and discussed how they to a certain level were unable to *“influence”* (Jenny) these factors and described how this tended to result in them being unable to *“do the same things that other people can do”* (Jenny) at work.

Noise levels were a particular challenge to many of the women across work contexts (Jenny, Angela, Brid, Leah, Sarah, and Ciara). They described being *“sensitive to noise”*

(Judith) and tended to find it “*distressing*” and “*painful*” and it impacted on their task completion:

“The noise of kids, the chatter of kids, sometimes they would wreck my head so much that even if I I’d be ages being able to start. I could not gather my thoughts with all that noise in my head... I would have to insist on a level of quiet that probably suppressed them with their natural creativity and chatting to each other because the noise was making me mad.” (Brid).

Several women expressed finding these social areas of the work environment excessively noisy and overwhelming:

“I know our canteen is really loud when you go into it, and you can barely hear yourself speak. And like I’ll come away from it and like oh my God, I feel like it’s worse. I didn’t have any break because it’s so loud.” (Angela).

Visual distractions such as clutter, people walking around, or a cluttered desk (Judith, Angela, Jenny, Leah) were identified as further factors which created barriers for the women:

“I find it really hard to work in a... I find life very difficult in a cluttered environment... It was almost like a hoarder’s house because they hadn’t any storage and it wasn’t very large and there was just things coming down. There was just boxes all up above your head and everything.” (Angela).

Artificial lighting and the presence of flickering lights affected the mood, concentration, and overall workplace satisfaction. Many of these environments made the women feel uncomfortable and Angela, Judith, Ciara, Jenny, and Brid highlighted these factors:

“That dark environment with no natural light for months on end. It was too much; it was just too much for me. And again, it’s made me very aware how the environment affects me. Super aware of how the environment affects me.” (Ciara).

“Not a big fan of too much artificial light and not enough real light.” (Judith)

The women highlighted how there were a lot of people present within the buildings, in some cases, there was little or no ventilation or air passing through their work buildings. This further caused the women to encounter challenges related to odours, finding multiple types of smells as an additional contributing factor to navigating workspaces:

“The people smell because they have a lot of perfume or they bring food, or they don’t shower. I was just overwhelmed because of those things.” (Jenny).

The women all experienced subjectively how the sensory work environment impinged on their ability to engage in their work affairs, however the women were also faced with a barrage of sensory input as they travelled to and from work. Environments of the bus and train, as well as the city in general presented much sensory input and acted as barriers. Jenny highlighted the impact of an influx of sensory input:

“I was overwhelmed on a daily basis because everything is insanely loud outside. The city centre is extremely crowded. I mean, you know yourself. ‘Name of place’, this area, just walking, just taking the ‘name of transport’ every day during rush hour. Being squeezed in with so many people...you have to dodge 200 people who just run into your way and it’s just all a bit overwhelming for me.” (Jenny).

Ciara described the sensory experiences that she had during bus journeys to work and the anxiety provoking experience that ensued.

“But sometimes the bus, the creepy crawly feeling that I get sometimes is gross and I really don’t like it. So, doing that for two hours before getting to work is hard enough and just having that extra sensory input from the day can cause a really bad start to the day and then you have to kind of calm yourself down and which can be quite difficult. I don’t think people realise the kind of sensory input the bus actually gives you.” (Ciara).

The sensory aspects associated with work as identified by the women, highlighted the considerable sensory environmental barriers the women faced in navigating the working world, which to many are invisible, but posed a threat to the women as they negotiated their working roles.

4.3.3.3 Disclosure is Complicated

The notion of ‘disclosure’ of an autistic identity within the workplace was raised as a contentious concept and was seen as complex by the women. As previously discussed in theme *Perceptions of Difference*, sub-theme; *Seeking an Answer and Impact of Diagnosis*, the women within the study were in the main diagnosed as autistic during their working lives. Therefore, this option of formal disclosure only presented itself as an aspect to consider as they continued navigating their working lives:

“I suppose like I'm not diagnosed that long either and I was in the job before I was diagnosed.” (Angela).

The women commonly found the concept of disclosure to be multifaceted. For many of the women this was another hurdle to manage. This not only impacted on them but on others. Ciara explained how, upon receiving a diagnosis, and in identifying one's needs there is a requirement to assert one's needs, and this can be perplexing:

“It's always incumbent on someone with disability to try and advocate for themselves, and as someone who wouldn't want to get spotlight on them very often at all, that would be a very difficult scenario to do.” (Ciara).

Sarah described how she *“found (disclosing her needs) really difficult to articulate”*. The women within the study were aware of the high-risk stakes of deciding to disclose. They identified how *“disclosure in itself in a work scenario might not be the best option for everyone”* (Ciara) and further discussed how they and others needed to weigh up their decision:

“So, when people talk about disclosing or not, I say you have to think about it long and hard and think about what's valuable to you and what you need to do.” (Brid).

Many of the women made conscious risk assessments. Angela described how she was unsure as to whether it would have a significant impact on her working role, and she evaluated the risks:

"I don't think it's something that I need to tell anybody... And to be honest, I don't think it's anyone's concern. There's no merit in me saying this, there's no merit in my not saying it. It's not going to change the equilibrium of my job by them knowing or them not knowing." (Angela).

Others recognised the personal risk for them in making a disclosure and were conscious of the impact that the disclosure would have on their experience within employment. This was often influenced by their past experiences of disclosure within the workplace. Given that many of the women had various working positions across their lives, the concept of disclosure was not necessarily a onetime occurrence but occurred at each of their employment junctures. Some of the women (Ciara, Leah, and Martha) highlighted how they have made the mindful decision not to disclose based on these past experiences:

"I suppose in this place I have not disclosed that I have a disability... I'm not sure I will ever disclose in my new job." (Ciara).

Ciara described how disclosing resulted in *"almost like an invisible kind of barrier that was never going to move away"*. She explained how she was *"never going to be able to just be looked at like a 'normal' employee"* in her previous job:

"What I found in my last job...there's that kind of benevolent discrimination, that would limit me, just because they knew I had a disability, which is why I'm not very anxious to tell people I have disabilities, because I do not want to deal with that sort of unconscious, benevolent discrimination. And I do think that's a throwback unfortunately from our religious past, and I don't know... because, if you see any of the research, you see people with disabilities and how they achieve, and depending on the culture, it really depends on the expectations they have... I do think it has infected my work before, and I do not wish to do it again. So, that is why. That sounds very hard-line, but it's true." (Ciara).

Leah perceived that she was *"bullied"* following a disclosure in her workplace and was now reluctant to disclose. The form of bullying described by Leah related to her performance of tasks within the workplace:

"This constant checking up and double checking and have you done this and being like, well, yes, I have. And sometimes I hadn't, don't get me wrong, but not everybody gets the privilege to do this every day. But yeah, it just became this kind of nit-picking. This kind of checking up on me. Which hadn't been there before – before I told her I had ADHD. And now all of a sudden was. And it was very

marked. She might have thought she was being subtle. It wasn't subtle at all. To the point where my co-worker who sat beside me was like, 'Is she getting onto you again?' Do you know what I mean? That's how unsubtle it was, that somebody else had notice." (Leah).

While Sarah's recent disclosure emphasised her perception of her boss's understanding of her performance:

"(Boss) will kind of view weakness in certain areas as kind of general incompetence." (Sarah).

Many of the women had their own opinions on disclosure. Angela perceived that disclosure would be a *"hindrance rather than a help"* and also identified that people can be *"narrow-minded"* (Angela). Their perceptions of how the world of work and society generally perceived autism was at the crux of their decision-making. Disclosure was seen to be associated with *"stigma"* (Leah), *"discrimination"* (Ciara) and negative perceptions from others influencing the women's disclosure decisions. Most of the women described the *"ignorance"* (Sarah) from employers and professionals around autism and identified that there was *"a huge amount of work to be done"* (Leah) to inform employers about autism and autistic employees. They perceived that disclosing might lead to negative consequences or biases:

"That's why I'm not openly autistic because unfortunately, there still is that stigma. There still is that thing.... My bosses don't know. Most people there don't know because I'm not comfortable with telling them because I don't know what their reaction will be... I don't know if I ever should because of the prejudice that is still there, the stigma that's still there..." (Leah).

The women were concerned that they would be judged if they disclosed. Ciara explained how people perhaps would have lower expectations of her:

"I do think it limits you in a very specific sort of way. I think it's implicit. I don't think these people go out of their way to limit people, but I do think there's an implicit kind of, it's that sort of Irish tradition of the care taking charity thing that kind of pulls in a little bit." (Ciara).

Disclosure was also associated with a pre-conceived idea of what autism was and many of the women were cognisant that employers and employees may base their decisions and engagement on this. Martha emphasised how referencing an autistic identity immediately “adds a layer” to people's perceptions:

“I'm sure there are people who, if they didn't know me, that's what I'm trying to avoid is this concept of what Autistic people are like and then avoiding hiring you based on that before they've met me.” (Martha).

The women illuminated how the notion of disclosure “brings up the whole thing that you're the problem” (Grace) and that if “anything goes wrong is that because” they are “autistic” (Brid). The women internalised them being the “problem” (Sarah) because they are “different” (Leah) and identified further how workplaces want to employ “normal” (Alex, Ciara) people:

“I do find sometimes when you say to someone like, ‘Oh, I have a disability,’ that's the reason for everything. That becomes the reason for everything. So, instead of, you know, whatever the problem might be or there might be other contributing factors, it becomes more about it's your inability to deal with something because of your disability. Does that make sense? Like it's a very fricking, it's a fraught scenario.” (Ciara).

“I have a tendency to assume that I'm the ‘problem’ because I have a diagnosis so I'm like, ‘Okay well I have this diagnosis so that probably means it's me that's got it wrong’, if I didn't have the diagnosis would I be like, ‘No, my colleague is a pain in the ass or whatever’.” (Sarah).

These findings have highlighted the complexity of disclosure. Evident in the findings is the intricate interplay of how disclosure and deciding to disclose within the workplace is influenced by personal beliefs, societal attitudes, and past workplace experiences that ultimately have shaped and influenced the women's work experiences and navigation of the world of work.

4.3.3.4 Trying to Fit in

The women endeavoured to navigate a world that was not tailored to their needs, requiring them to perceive the need to adapt and change themselves and their behaviours to *“fit in”* (Leah, Grace, and Martina). They felt that society imposed a set of expectations and pressures that they were required to conform to, and highlighted how it was *“the tune you have to dance to”* (Angela).

“Autistic people have to do that way more often than most people do.... to kind of get on in society so that they can, they can seem more ‘normal’.” (Judith).

These were not acts or steps that the women wished to take, but they were seen as crucial to navigate the world:

“It’s society, is literally going you can’t be yourselves because if we don’t like it, that’s just what we did to gay people. You can’t be gay because straight people don’t like it, so you’ve got to pretend. That’s, we’ve just been doing the same thing to all these different groups, you know.” (Martina).

They described employing a multitude of social and interactive strategies and approaches to conceal their perceived social difference and to fit in within work. There were three sub-themes; *‘Learned how to socialise’*, *‘Pretending to be someone else’* and *‘monitoring’*.

4.3.3.4.1 *‘Learned how to socialise’*

Some of the women (Leah, Ciara, Alex, Brid, and Jenny) described making a conscious effort to observe, watch, copy, and learn how to socialise from others around them. They recalled how they learned from watching the television, or by paying attention to people’s words and reactions. This conscious observation of others allowed the women to build up a bank of social niceties and an *“understanding of different interactions”* (Ciara), to then apply in the workplace. Some of the women discussed how they developed scripts and utilised these scripts in their daily interactions:

"I just watched them and scripted from them, I learned how to do that. Not as well as them, but I failed miserably many times with my trying to be funny and just not reading the room properly at all, but I learned so much, and now I know what I was doing, now I know that I was, and I have always done that. I have always scripted and learned from other people" (Leah).

Other's used scripts to succeed at interview:

"I did quite a lot of preparation. You can find lists of the standard suggested – the interview questions that you're likely to be asked. These random sort of competency – give me an example of a time when you did this, blah-blah-blah kind of thing.... Kind of almost preparing scripts in your head of things you're going to say." (Judith).

A sense of hypervigilance was evident from their descriptions of how they learned to socialise and engage in social interactions. Ciara worked out what was expected of her in social situations and applied a particular approach:

"For years and years and years, I was watching people, observing people, learning how to interact with people, learning by rote how social interactions work...and applying them in some sort of scientific method." (Ciara).

While for Brid, she described the cognitive and intellectual process she took:

"I have since then got interview skills down pat. Realising you read the application form, you underline all the things that are required, you write down what you have to do with all of those things, you only tell the good and not the bad. But sometimes it's a nice idea to put in a little bit of the bad and how you overcame it to show that you can overcome adversity. So, those are my interview skills. But literally, I had to learn them in kind of a cognitive way where other people can express them in another way." (Brid).

Some women articulated how they adopted the social approaches of those around them as an additional means of learning. Behaviours and mannerisms were copied directly from the people who were around the women in a bid to fit and blend in:

"Keeping me hidden from the outside not from the inside. Keeping me hidden by mimicking other people's behaviour, other people's words, other people's mannerisms, other people's everything.... like lots of little bits of lots of people." (Alex).

“I do it sometimes when I’m talking to somebody, I’ll start talking like them or inflecting like them and you’re like, oh God they’re going to think I’m taking the piss out of them, they’re going to think I’m messing and I’m not.” (Leah).

Interestingly, Jenny in her narrative described how she ended up formally studying communication and social interaction:

“But I learned how to socialise. I learned. I researched people, how they interact, how you’re supposed to interact. That’s my master’s as well. I didn’t know I was autistic, but I basically did a Masters in how to understand humans, human communication, without knowing it.” (Jenny).

Learning to socialise involved not only learning what and how to say but also involved understanding the subtle nuances of how, and when, to interact and socialise within the workspace:

“I just learned the new rituals that I could do with them and every so often, and it was such a small office I couldn’t actually not do it because if I didn’t do it, they’d be like oh what’s wrong with you... So, eventually I just kind of, I went with it. We had lunch every Friday and we had yeah, a teatime which was like the thing we did; 11 o’clock we were having our tea.” (Ciara).

The need for the women to learn how others around them socialised was a willed action taken by the women, in order to, in their opinion to support them in interacting with others within their work environments and more generally, and to be perceived as more acceptable.

4.3.3.4.2 ‘Pretending to be someone else’

In some cases, the women went as far as portraying an entirely different character or person to fit in with others at work. Several of the women likened it to acting or performing a role, stating that they were *“performing all the time”* (Martina). The women changed their characters based on the context and the different situations in which they found themselves. Jenny explained this within an interview setting:

“I can put on the kind of very charming mask. You know this kind of, I like to make people laugh and I’m very good at it during interviews, and that kind of sticks with

people, because most people would go in and be super nervous and then I'm not. I just... I can play this role." (Jenny).

The roles or people that the women performed did not only change in different situations but the level to which they pretended to be *"someone else"* (Martina) changed and differed for each woman, Judith described some of the changes she has made:

"I mean, everyone does it up to a point where you're not necessarily entirely yourself in front of other people and you're kind of putting on a face I guess."
(Judith).

Pretending to be someone else and performing was a conscious effort made by the women, however the description provided by Alex highlights how it was not truly her present in the engagement:

"It's like when I meet people, I have all these stupid rules in my head like. Like I will tell somebody that I don't know anything about any Marvel superheroes because it will be a rule in my head that girls aren't meant to like Marvel, which is completely illogical. And I'll tell people that I don't know anything which, it's the one time that I lie the most because I can't stop it. I don't normally lie." (Alex).

4.3.3.4.3 'Monitoring'

Monitoring oneself was an additional strategy and approach used by the women in navigating their working world, and an approach to try and fit in. The women appeared to always be on alert ensuring that they were constantly monitoring and controlling themselves. For some of the women (Leah, Alex, and Angela), they described how they monitored and limited their 'stimming':

"I don't know when I started, I just know I did start and I know the feeling and I know, I remember it being a deliberate act of realising, 'Oh, other people don't shake their hands like this, I'd better stop shaking my hands like this so much. '... And stopping doing it, deliberately stopping doing it as much as they could."
(Leah).

While others (Angela, Martina, Leah, and Jenny) described how they were required to self-monitor their automatic and initial views, beliefs, and responses. Martina explained a scenario at work:

“Like literally, every time I met somebody, and they were having a conversation, I'd be like agreeing with things I didn't think were right at all... If someone asked you something, you're kind of thinking what is the best response. Not like what do I actually want to say... So, I wouldn't actually be giving my own opinion or kind of saying what I wanted to say a lot of the time, it would have just been like, what's the best response to give in this situation to keep myself safe maybe? And to avoid confrontation or just pleasing somebody.” (Martina).

And Leah further emphasised this point:

“I'm atheist which is not an easy thing to be in Ireland to be honest, especially if you're working in 'certain work sectors' and stuff like that. That is an extra layer of masking you have to do.” (Leah).

In addition to monitoring themselves in the moment Martina highlighted how she engaged in self-monitoring after she engaged in work interactions:

“The other part of it is, is that I'd second guess what I've said to somebody, and I might replay it over in my head where I've said something you know, actually you know, you're not doing what you're supposed to do blah blah blah. Did I say it in the correct way, should I have said this, should I have maybe phrased it nicer, was I too harsh? And I'll replay that over and over again.” (Martina).

These approaches used by the women to fit in within the work environment, were will full and learned. This indeed placed a greater burden on the women to control and manage these strategies to fit in, as well as negotiate the other multi-dimensional aspects of work and their work journey.

4.3.3.5 Summary to Working in a Neurotypical World

This theme referred to how the women were constantly negotiating the working world. Explicit throughout the narratives of the women was the double empathy problems that

the women faced within their working lives. Many of the women recalled certain situations whereby there had been social misunderstandings within the workplace, this often put the women at a disadvantage. To not stand out, the women employed strategies to act 'more neurotypical' because they perceived that this was required to avoid being further disadvantaged within the workplace. The unaccommodating sensory work environments in which the women participated also placed additional pressures on the women and acted as a barrier. Further to this, the women had to make the decision whether to disclose their autistic identity within the workplace and once again we see how this placed an additional burden on the women. The women were constantly having to strike a balance to manoeuvre themselves within the neurotypical working world.

4.3.4 Autistic Burnout: The Consequence of Navigating the Working World

As evidenced by the preceding themes, the women were navigating a demanding working world. They described how on a day-to-day basis they were utilising a large amount of energy and pushing themselves to manage work and "*to get through any day*" (Brid). This consistent management and navigation of the working world developed into a cumulative load of stressors on the women. The additional effort and burden on the women to manage and employ strategies to fit into the neurotypical working world by adapting and morphing to conceal themselves within their interactions and additionally the debilitating exhaustion experienced by the women from the stress of living in an unaccommodating neurotypical working, significantly contributed to the women experiencing autistic burnout. In this section the prevalence and experience of autistic burnout among the women in the study is described and the subsequent implications on their working lives will be discussed within the sub-themes of *Experiences of Autistic Burnout* and *the Impact of Autistic Burnout*.

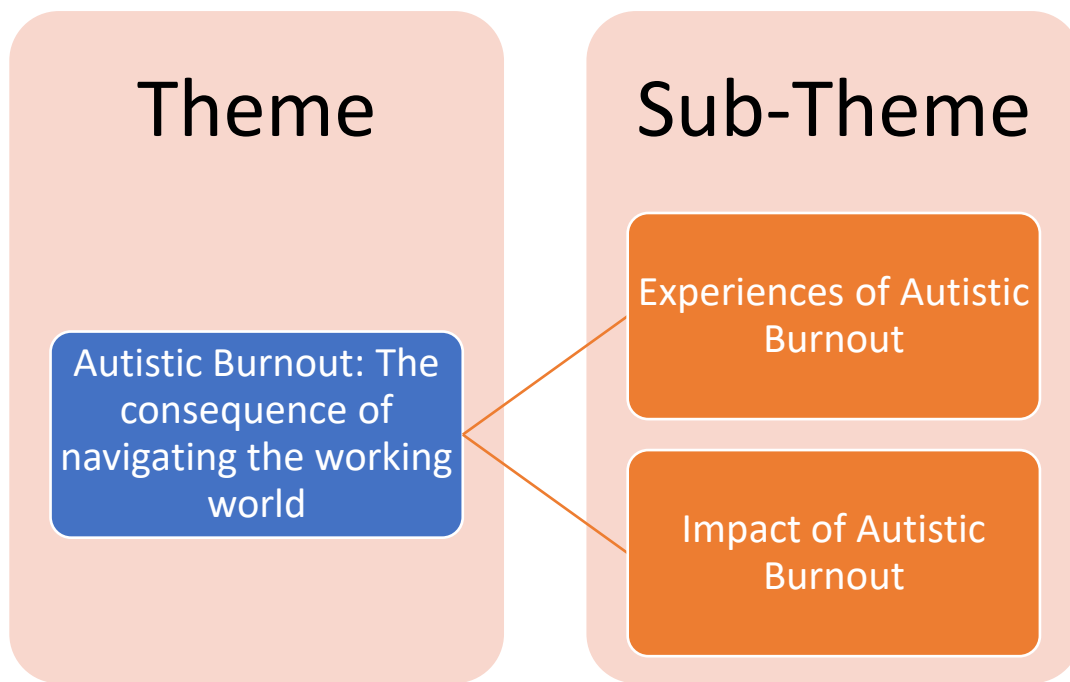


Figure 4.5 Autistic Burnout: The consequence of navigating the working world and sub-themes

4.3.4.1 Experiences of Autistic Burnout

The prevalence of autistic burnout within the women's narrative was widespread. Most of the women within the study experienced autistic burnout at some point during their college and/or professional working lives. Hearing the experts' own subjective accounts of experiencing burnout underscored the multidimensional, but common aspects of their experiences. Their narratives illuminated the diverse characteristics associated with their individual experience of autistic burnout. The associated experience of autistic burnout was characterised by numerous negative descriptors of events. It was depicted and described as "*rough*" (Judith), "*weird*" (Leah), and "*very difficult*" (Ciara).

For some of the women, burnout presented itself as a sudden occurrence, described as "*literally like a switch*" (Martha), whereby the women were fine one moment, but experienced a burnout immediately. While periods of burnout were recurring for some of the women. For example, in Judith's narrative, burnout presented itself at five distinct

periods of time across her work journey. Her narrative is a good example of this recurring nature of burnout and a short description of this experience is provided to illustrate these findings. Initially burnout presented itself during Judith's early college years. Judith described this:

"I worked really hard for my exams, and I think as a result of that I had a bit of a mini burnout. It wasn't nearly as bad as the later one, but it did result in me that summer, between second year and third year I didn't really do anything." (Judith).

Judith experienced another period of burnout towards the end of her final year in college, citing the year's activities required of her as *"pretty tough"*. Burnout resurfaced for her again a few years into her professional working life. This onset of burnout corresponded with additional responsibility and collaborative aspects of team engagement. Despite demonstrating significant resilience and perseverance through these challenges, Judith described how it *"started to go a bit wrong"*. Judith's continuous exertion eventually led to escalating and increased stress levels culminating in what she described as a *"massive, big crash"*. This extended experience of burnout persisted beyond the immediate aftermath of that burnout experience and recurred for her following completion of her post-graduate course. Upon re-entering the workplace on a full-time basis, Judith recalled grappling with burnout once again.

This relapse and remitting type burnout presentation is not always the case for all the women. For other women (Ciara, Angela, and Jenny) burnout is a more persistent and more sustained challenge:

"It can depend – sometimes it's a lot of small things, it's not usually one big thing, usually. Depending on what the scenario is, it would just be unrealistic timelines, there'd be reports that were due, conflicting demands, sometimes there'd just be conflicting demand. Sometimes it would just be a load of little things that were popping up. Sometimes it's even like someone asking you a question, your birthday or something, asking that over and over again. That could be enough." (Ciara).

Regardless of whether the burnout experienced by the women was a distinct or a more sustained experience for them, what was common to the women was the impact that it

had on them, the depletion of their internal resources, both physically and mentally. The women used multiple words to describe this depletion as “*exhaustion*” (Brid, Jenny, Judith, and Angela); “*fatigue*” (Martha), “*tired*” (Grace); “*dragging*” (Brid) and “*catatonic*” (Jenny). For Martha, she described “*how quickly I fatigue*” and this fatigue and exhaustion was a core feature for the women. They described the debilitating state that this left them in:

“I would just go home, and I would just be catatonic for the evening, for the weekend, I wouldn’t be able to move... and just exhaustion, physical exhaustion or mental exhaustion in a way.” (Jenny).

For some of the women they were so exhausted that they couldn’t engage in anything:

“I would need to do nothing, and I wouldn’t even be able to do hobby activities, they would be too draining. So, I would literally just need to vegetate for a day...I just, I need to do nothing.” (Martha).

Two of the women; Jenny and Judith conveyed that they were initially bewildered by the overpowering sensation of fatigue, questioning its incapacitating nature. However, they soon realised that this depletion of energy was undeniably overt and real for them:

“I’ve read about autistic burnout as well. So, apparently that’s a distinguished thing. And it’s not because... I always thought, how can you be burned out? What’s wrong with you? Why are you not stronger, you know? You’re not even working full-time. How can you be so exhausted all the time? But maybe it’s just because I’m much more sensitive to many things that don’t even affect other people.” (Jenny).

For some of the women, in particular Judith, Leah, Jenny, and Martha their burnout was characterised with a loss of wide-ranging skills and decreased functional capacity, including engagement and participation in personal self-care activities, engagement in personal interests, and daily domestic activities. And this change could be sudden:

“One day I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t feed myself; I couldn’t walk, I couldn’t do anything. I literally couldn’t lift my hand to put a fork to my mouth. My body just went, do you know what, you’re not looking after me so I’m just going to do this myself and ...it was just literally like my body wouldn’t or couldn’t do anything that I asked of it...It was a weird kind of, it was a really weird sensation. It was really weird, to just not have any control over your body or not be able to.” (Leah).

The deleterious feature of burnout for Judith meant that she was unable to perform previously enjoyable activities that were meaningful within her life.

“Like I couldn’t follow the plot of the TV programme, I couldn’t read a book like.”
(Judith).

And this further characterised and extended itself to impact on cognitive functioning, resulting in disruption of executive functioning skills:

“I wasn’t stringing thoughts together.” (Judith)

Depression and anxiety emerged as key features in the decline of the women’s mental health resulting from burnout. Many of the women described how they felt overwhelmed, a sentiment that seemed to consume them and their wellbeing. Brid described how she *“did lean into depression”*, and this was also like Jenny and Martha’s experience of burnout. Unique to Martha’s experience was the abrupt onset of panic attacks:

“Just out of nowhere one day I just had the first panic attack I’d ever had in my life and it was huge, and it’s kind of... and I don’t know why... and then every day I was having these massive panic attacks.” (Martha).

Anxiety played a significant feature in Judith’s experience, and this translated into her experiencing social withdrawal and disengagement:

“Just kind of being very socially anxious. In my kind of burnout period, I was excessively socially anxious. Like I wouldn’t even like go up to a counter in a shop or a takeaway to order something, like someone had to go and do those things for me. I just wouldn’t go up to someone and speak to them. I mean that was quite extreme. I’m not that bad anymore but for a while, yeah. I was very, very socially anxious.” (Judith).

Features of their burnout emphasised how the women became more sensitive than usual to environmental stimuli and how the sensory and physical environments surrounding them were more complex and difficult to manage and navigate. Leah highlighted how she *“struggled so much in terms of noise, touch”*, while Jenny highlighted how *“everything is insanely loud”*. This reduced tolerance to the sensory environment, resulted in some of the women having to stay at home, with a need to disengage from society. Leah, Ciara, Angela,

Jenny, and Judith highlighted this as a feature of their burnout, whereby they “barely left the house or spoke to anyone” (Judith) or where they needed to be at home “in a quiet, dark place” (Leah). For Leah, Angela and Ciara, “meltdowns” (Leah) were a manifestation of their diminished and reduced tolerance to stimuli and stressors that existed. Ciara’s vivid account of her meltdowns encapsulated this experience:

“An outpouring of emotion. It’s usually just you being completely overwhelmed by whatever emotion is going on in your body. And it could be multiple emotions, it could be sadness, you could be crying, it could be angry, there could be loads of different feelings. But it’s just this kind of massive explosion of feelings that you have to get out in some way. Usually what happens is... trying to get out some of those horrible... it’s like a bomb of feelings you have to try and get out. And almost irrational, it’s almost like an irrational reaction, it’s completely... you’ve so much in here that just needs to explode outwards. And yeah, you can be very upset, I’ve been very upset generally, really upset, and I’d be crying, a lot of distress, until I can calm myself down. But I’d be almost inconsolable at that point, until I’m able to calm myself down. And an awful lot of it could be also sensory as well, so I could be in a complete overwhelmed sensory experience, sometimes might have to go up to a dark room and try and calm myself back down. Put a lot of pressure on me just to bring it back down into some sort of even keel. But getting to that point is awful.” (Ciara).

Autistic burnout as described by the accounts of the women demonstrated the substantial negative experiences. These experiences had a profound impact on the women and their work lives, which will be further discussed in the next section.

4.3.4.2 The Impact of Autistic Burnout

The women’s narratives identified that autistic burnout placed a significant toll on the women. It resulted in various consequences for them as they navigated their professional working world. These encompassed internal, external, and societal impacts. Among the women in the study, four (Brid, Judith, Ciara, and Leah) reported a severe effect on their working lives, prompting them to consciously decide to resign and quit from their professional roles. Brid’s early narrative on work detailed her entry into a profession after completing college, securing employment upon graduation, and remaining successful in employment within that role for many years. However, Brid proceeded to elaborate and

explained that after several years she was struggling to maintain the role, because of burnout. She detailed how her role was “constant” and how she was “just trying to survive to work”, but ultimately, she explained:

“I had a successful career as an ‘role in education and training’ where I was very highly regarded but I was burning out, didn’t know that at the time but I was burning out and left that.” (Brid).

In the next quote from Judith, we sense the gravitas of deciding to resign from her role. Overcoming burnout was not an option for her, despite various attempts to return, indicating a strong commitment and work ethic. The personal consequence was quitting work:

“I tried sort of doing like a bit of a phased return to work, a couple of times, you know, like starting doing like sort of a few half-days and stuff and kind of building it back up and ... it didn’t really work... I basically gave up trying to go back to work and just quit eventually.” (Judith).

Making these decisions to resign signalled the sizable impact that burnout was exacting on the women. Moreover, the decision to take some time out of work or take a break from work was another additional indicator of the impact and seriousness that the burnout had on these women. This was evident by the substantial number of women within the study taking time off work. Seven of the women (Judith, Angela, Leah, Ciara, Brid, Martha, and Jenny) indicated that across their working journeys that they needed to take some time out of work to take care of their health and wellbeing. For some of the women, they choose to take a considerable amount of time out, as described by Brid:

“I could not keep up with the demands that were being put upon me – and the demands I was putting upon myself. So, I took a career break. I took a career break.” (Brid).

Evident within the stories of the women was their insight into the fact that they were on the cusp of burnout or had burnt out and needed to take some time out. The women chose various mechanisms for taking time out. Judith explained how she negotiated some time off with her employers as an interim solution to managing herself:

“One thing they did do in the short-term was give me a block of unpaid leave. I got three weeks of unpaid leave and I linked that to one week of normal holiday. So, yeah, because I was getting dangerously close to burning myself out again. So, I just kind of needed to stop for a bit and catch up on some basic having a life as well and that was brilliant actually. Like I did do a lot of resting but I also did a lot of life admin things that I wanted to do for ages, and I saw my friends.” (Judith).

Ciara adopted an alternative work strategy to allow her to take short bouts of time off, to facilitate her recovery and enable recuperation:

“I would take an annual leave day – in the ‘name of job’ we often have things called flexi days, so we can build up some time and get a flexi day. I would just use my flexi days often, I’d say 98% of the time, just to have those days off where I could rebuild and refill my energy level. And it would just be not interacting with anyone else... And it would build back up the energy reserves, and then I could face the day again.” (Ciara).

These experiences highlighted the capacity and agency of the women who made considerable efforts such as taking time off work to support their wellbeing and to reconnect. At times this was following medical advice:

“I was still really struggling.... I went to my doctor and I was like, look, I really am struggling, I really – and she said, ‘You’ve been struggling with this for a while, haven’t you?’ Well, yes.... So, she actually signed me off work. She was like, that’s the biggest thing. That’s the biggest thing that is affecting your mental health and she said you do not need to be there. It’s really damaging for you. That environment is really kind of toxic for me. So, I got signed off on illness benefit.” (Leah).

The concept of working part-time was not a matter of choice for these women but was seen as a necessity to combat and counteract potential future burnout experiences. Judith’s narrative regarding the consequences of burnout serves as an illustration of this point and provides a compelling example of the impact experienced by the women. Post burnout, Judith re-entered and engaged in full-time employment for the first couple of weeks before she once again was *“dangerously close to burning myself out again”*. At this point, her narrative focused on how she negotiated with her manager, in a *“kind of a long-complicated battle”* a way of working that she could sustain, whereby *“we were literally trying to think of every possible thing... with a lot of suggestions of me trying to work still*

more than three days but making it somehow better and more tolerable to support” her to work. Despite Judith’s manager “struggling to put himself in my shoes”, questioning “do you want to really want to restrict yourself to only working three-days a week, kind of for the rest of your life?”, she negotiated working part-time on a three day a week basis. Judith’s response to her manager, as illustrated in the next quote shed light on the need and duress the women were under to work on a part-time basis:

“It means I actually have a life and don't make myself sick then yeah, duh of course I do’. But without being that blunt obviously...But eventually both me and my employer worked out that either they were going to give me three-days or I was going to leave. Basically, that’s what it boiled down to... amazingly we have finally come to an agreement.” (Judith).

These sentiments are echoed in Jenny’s narrative. At the point of time of interview Jenny was experiencing a period of burnout, having previously worked long hours, she recognised that sustaining a full-time working position was no longer feasible for her and she was seeking employment options with flexible working arrangements:

“Now that I know that these are the real problems, because I wasn’t aware, like I don’t know how it’s even possible not to be aware that those kind of things are draining you so much, but I wasn’t aware. Now I know I have to just figure out alternatives and that’s why I was looking into jobs that you can do remotely or online... I would still go and work somewhere, let’s say maybe two or three days a week... but I couldn’t do 40 hours a week. I don’t know how people do it. I just, I don’t have the energy for that.” (Jenny).

The reality for some of the women if they worked full-time was:

“I would just fall apart. I just don't have the capacity for the stress management that would make that possible for me. And when I was starting to work four days a week/five days a week that’s what triggered the breakdown.” (Martha).

Additionally, Martha highlighted in her narrative how *“there is a limit to how much I can take on and still remain healthy”*. Of note, she made the personal sacrifice to strike a balance of health with work. Therefore, evident was the sacrifice that the women were making to manage their health but remain working.

The impact of autistic burnout caused by engaging in the working world extended to a diminished personal capacity. This added to the burden for these women. Primarily, the biggest impact for the women personally was their ability to engage and participate in their social lives. Jenny's quote below highlighted how her ability to socialise was compromised and this further impacted on her emotionally:

"I mean, it makes me very depressed. Like let's say I work all week and I go home immediately after work, maybe I go to the supermarket or something, but then I don't socialise with anybody. So, let's say I make... Like I wanted to meet a friend on Saturday and I realised that I just absolutely couldn't do it. So, because I just couldn't. I just didn't have the energy left, so I got very upset and I cried a lot because I can't even meet one person once a week, then what am I living for? I know my job is rewarding in a way in itself, but that's not enough. That's not your life. You still need to have some private life. And it's always been a problem... the quota is full. There is no way I'm going to socialise in my own time with the people I choose to socialise with. I think that's a problem for many autistic people as well." (Jenny)

As the women made strides to balance various aspects of their lives, the women made intentional choices around the daily activities in which they engaged in:

"I can have a social life. But social life, working life, and a tidy house, tidy living space. I can do one and a half of those and no more." (Brid).

Angela, a mother, highlighted how burnout impacted on her mood and emotions. As a result, she was required to stay away from her home and her family for an extended period to aid recovery:

"If it's two or three days I'll have to stay there, one or two nights, because I just can't do it. Like I can't come home and be a mam to my children when I'm that exhausted. And that's hard because like they haven't done anything wrong and I'm coming in, this grumpy ass who can't even look at them and it's just like, just I'll stay away." (Angela).

This draws attention to the impact of burnout on the management of personal roles and relationships, and this further extended to the intimate side of the women's lives. Two of the women (Brid and Jenny) conveyed and expressed the challenge and struggle they faced in maintaining and sustaining romantic relationships across their lives:

“I could not maintain a relationship with somebody because I couldn’t see them. But eventually I did meet a man who liked me anyway and he which I like too. But I was just exhausted.” (Brid).

4.3.4.3 Summary of Autistic Burnout: The consequence of navigating the working world

The findings presented under this theme; *Autistic Burnout: The consequence of navigating the working world* have demonstrated the cost of burnout caused by work on the women’s lives. The personal experience of burnout from working is different across the women’s work stories, some experienced burnout early in their lives, particularly during college while others experienced it later within their working lives. For some of the women, burnout was a sudden onset while for others, it tended to be a build-up of cumulative factors whereby the working world appeared out of sync with the women, which resulted in the women experiencing burnout. The women detailed how burnout presented itself for them, as they experienced fatigue, exhaustion, and a loss of the ability to function. Burnout had serious consequences for these women and resulted in the women at times quitting their jobs, needing to work part-time or work reduced hours, and the need to make even further sacrifices to manage themselves.

4.3.5 Summary of Study One Findings

This chapter has presented the findings from the analysis of narratives of the first interviews conducted with the twelve women. The evidence presented in this chapter demonstrated the various work experiences and journeys of the women. Through descriptions of their experiences of navigating the world of work, the women offered a variety of narratives, with four themes identified.

While the first interview sought to explore their narratives around their work experience, the second interview offered the opportunity to further explore their experiences in more depth and explore other aspects not addressed in the first interview. The themes identified by the analysis of the second interview (Study Two) is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter Five- Findings from Study Two and Study Three

5.1 Introduction

Chapter Four introduced the twelve women and the superordinate themes from Study One. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section presents the findings from the second interviews (Study Two) confirming the themes from Study One with new data. It also introduces two additional themes; *Experiencing Success at Work* and *Employers-What they should know*. The second section presents Study Three; exploring the perspectives of the women of participating in the research.

5.2 Findings from Study Two

The four overarching themes that were identified in Study One were confirmed by the analysis of the second interviews. The first section confirms and validates the women's experiences in navigating the world of work, providing some additional insight into their experiences. Following this, the two additional themes, distinct from those derived in the first interviews will be presented. These themes serve to underscore the perspectives and experiences that enabled the women to succeed within employment and their working roles. Furthermore, it sheds light on how the women perceive employers must engage and act to support autistic women to thrive within the workplace.

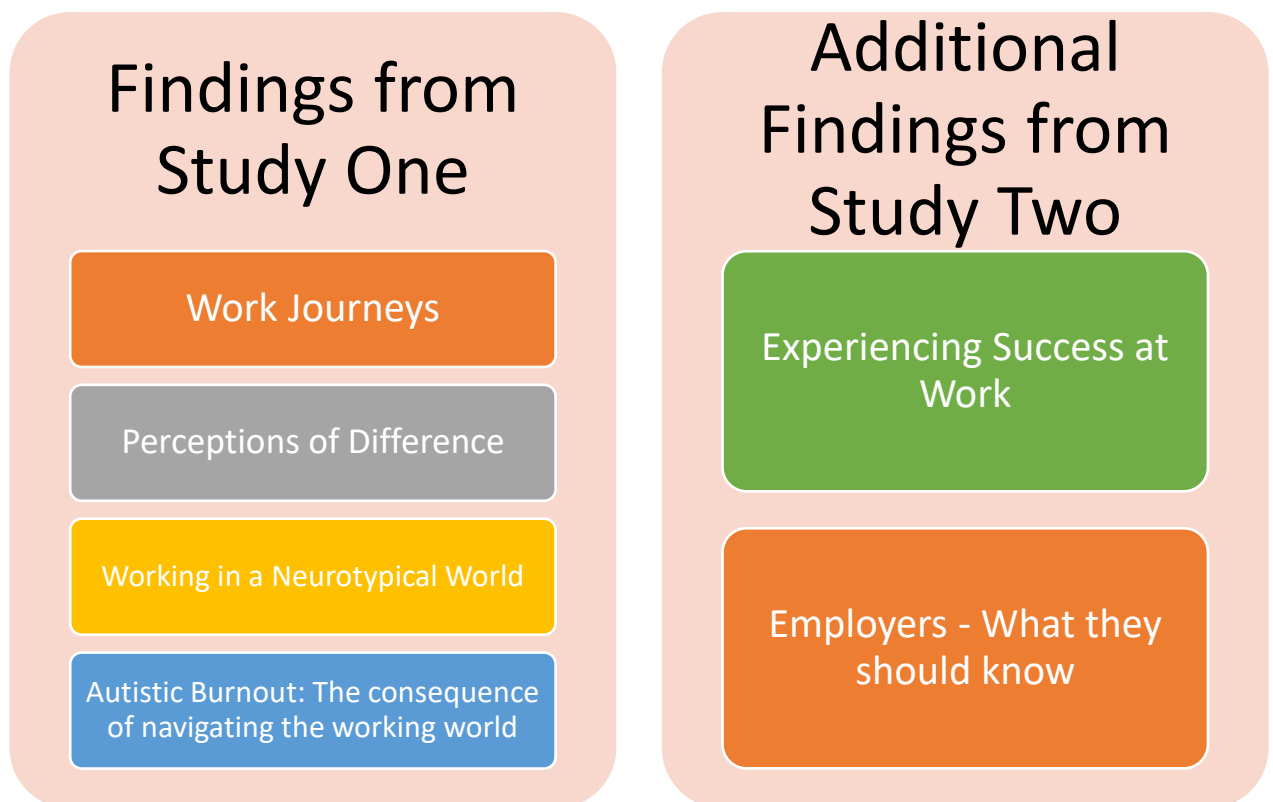


Figure 5.1 Overview of Themes from Study One (confirmed in Study Two) and additional themes from Study Two

5.2.1 Work Journeys

Building on Grace's experience of unemployment, presented in the first theme; *Work Journey* and relating to sub-theme; *Chequered Work History* in Study One, this discussion was further extended and elaborated on in Study Two, when Grace presented a "*social welfare slip*" as the object that represented her personal working journey. For Grace, she elaborated on how her fragmented and disjointed career trajectory, marked by significant long-term unemployment signified the setbacks and failure in her working journey:

"The whole failure. Failure to fit in. Failure to make anything work. Being assisted. Not being able to contribute to society. Being incompetent. Not being able to stick to a job. Not being able to work with a team that's happy with you. That's what it represents. And yeah, failure." (Grace).

Based on these experiences, Grace further detailed how she was concerned that the presence of unemployment was likely to remain in her uneven work journey and would create further complexity in her future professional life:

“But I’m 45. I’m going to be 46 very soon. And this is really scary because there is no way of knowing if this is not going to... continue to be more of this, more of short-term jobs that I fail, that I don’t secure a reference for, that trigger a lot of anxiety and distress that throws me back into depression for so many months. Maybe there’s just going to be more of it.” (Grace).

This sense of ambiguity and concern with regard to the women’s working futures was further evident in the second interview and was exemplified within the sub-theme: *Career Progression*. Many of the women identified how they do not have an “end goal” (Martha, Ciara, Jenny, Grace, Leah, and Angela) and have “never really progressed in a career... I’ve never taken steps to move up the corporate ladder” (Jenny). “Figure(ing) out a career path” (Jenny), was the primary goal for many of the women in the study, but this was and is not easily navigated. As they moved through career journeys, the women highlighted what was important to them. For Jenny, she hoped to engage in “meaningful” work, while Ciara wanted “to be happy”.

“I want to be proceeding with my career rather than just ticking over... So, I pushed myself to do a much more difficult course and I am doing a lot more one-offs like... this is the first year, I am trying to push myself and do more professionally.” (Martha).

Judith has a different view on work, she highlighted how she does not wish to have a desire to strive in advancing her career, as she identified other meaningful activities that tend to take precedence, this highlighted a distinct variation from some of the other women’s experiences with regard to career progression:

“I feel kind of bad in some ways for not having more ambition because I would have been quite happy... like having a social life and doing hobbies and things.” (Judith).

5.2.2 Perceptions of Difference

The sub-theme: *Perceptions of Others*, was further emphasised in the second interview. Within this we gain a deeper understanding of how perceived societal reactions experienced by the women exerted an undue influence on the women and their perception of themselves and their perception of difference. Leah extended this discourse by referring to how in general society perceived the women:

“We’re kind of made less capable by society and the way society works, I have capabilities but just the way things work I’m not, they’re not playing to my strengths. I know you can’t change everything for a few people, but it would help the majority I think....” (Leah).

While Ciara broadens these perceptions by addressing how society does not like how individuals deviate from the norm and an expectation for them to ‘fit in’ with society:

“There is this thing about you want diversity and you want people with disabilities, but you also want them to be as ‘normal’ as possible. They have to perform a certain way in order to kind of fit and it is this kind of unfortunate.” (Ciara).

5.2.3 Working in a Neurotypical World

The sub-theme; *Trying to Fit in* was further confirmed by the women’s narratives in the second interview. The women perceived how the working environments were not set up to accommodate neurodivergent individuals. Ciara’s quote below reinforced this inference:

“How normal you can fit into an environment; how typical you are ... The work environment has been set up so people do a certain thing, act a certain way, and then finish their day. It’s a system that works for a lot of people, I don’t think it works for the majority of people, it works for a lot of people.... in order to fit in, you have to be your best self, and you have to not have those sort of things that people with AS or any sort of disability might have... You can’t rock the system....” (Ciara).

Many of the women further elaborated on additional ways and strategies they used to ‘fit in’ and engage within the ‘neurotypical’ working world, thus confirming the strategies

discussed in the first interview. Alex in her second interview brought a jug as a prop to support her description of her work experiences. The jug required polishing; *“you have to rub at that for ages to get to the shininess. It’s normally not shiny”* (Alex). She explained how the lack of shininess was *“like it has a mask”* and how people don’t see the true colour of it, like how she believed people have *“no idea who I actually am”* (Alex) because she employs so many strategies to conceal who she really is:

“I’ve always known who I am, it’s always been there. I’ve never lost my poor self at all. But I’ve never been able to show it.” (Alex).

She further discussed how she was instructed and advised to take on a different persona as a child:

“The easiest way to keep me away was just to become somebody completely different.... So, it just, I kept doing it... Because I was taught to do it when I was little. I was allowed be me at home, but I was not allowed be me out in the world. Like so I used to say that there used to be real mum and fake mum because real mum would let me be me at home and they’d be like you’re wonderful and you’re great and you should just be you and it was like a really positive environment. But if we went out and we went anywhere near her family or anything, all those rules were out the window. It was never said that way but like it was assumed... But so, there was this unsaid rule that I didn’t pick up on for ages but once I did... But once I went outside it was like all of those rules flipped and I had to be somebody else.”
(Alex).

The women identified and further elaborated on the reasons and rationale for implementing strategies to fit into the world and to conceal and hide their real selves. Leah described it:

“It’s conditioning, that’s what it is, it’s not quite operant conditioning but it’s conditioning. I’ve been conditioned to act in a certain way because that’s what is perceived of like, you know, that’s why an awful lot of autistic women are hyper-feminine, or the complete opposite. A lot of our behaviour is performative because it’s not internalised behaviour, it’s what we think society expects of us a lot of the time.” (Leah).

She further described her reasoning using her prop of a 'car key', she saw these strategies as a *"defence mechanism"* (Leah) as she was worried about how others would perceive her:

"I really don't want people to see this because obviously it's very vulnerable and it will change their perception of me and stuff like that, so it's a hard one. It is really hard like, people talk about this idea of unmasking, and you know, I don't know if I will ever be able to do that. I don't know if I will ever be able to be that vulnerable because my stims are really, really, they are full-on. Like they are full-on, there's no covering up, there is no hiding what they are when I am properly stimming."
(Leah).

And for Alex implementing these strategies was *"complicated"*:

"It's so much more than just a mask on my face or on my behaviour. It's so much more, like it's intertwined with things I think, it's intertwined with beliefs I have, it's intertwined with everything. It's like, not really like a mask so much as a complicated web of lies." (Alex).

The women were reluctant to allow their true selves to be shown for fear of ridicule and rejection within the workplace. For Martina, she saw the implementation of the strategies as *"survival skills"* (Martina):

"That's quite traumatic if that keeps happening to you, so it's kind of like a trauma response basically. So, you've got your fight, flight, freeze, fake, and fawn. And so, there's a few different... I suppose when I talk about masking, I kind of break it into, right, you lock yourself away because you don't really want anybody to... That part of you has been kind of ridiculed or rejected or... It mightn't be people actually saying stuff to you, but it might just be you pick up on people not being comfortable around you or just treating you different to other people." (Martina).

The constant negotiation and management of oneself to manage the neurotypical working world identified in Study One and confirmed in Study Two highlighted the significant burden that this placed on the women and the subsequent experience of burnout that many of the women experienced within their working lives.

5.2.4 Experiencing Success at Work

From the perspective of the women despite the world of work apparently being at odds with the neurodiversity perspective and inclusive principles, which emerged from Study One, Study Two shed a particular light on the fact that most of the women were successful at obtaining employment and participating within the world of work. The women referred to the supports and enablers that facilitated their engagement in the workforce and these are evident from the sub-themes; *A Good Job Fit*, *Employment Supports Systems and Programmes*, *Familial and Collegiate Support* and *Meaning and Value of Work*.

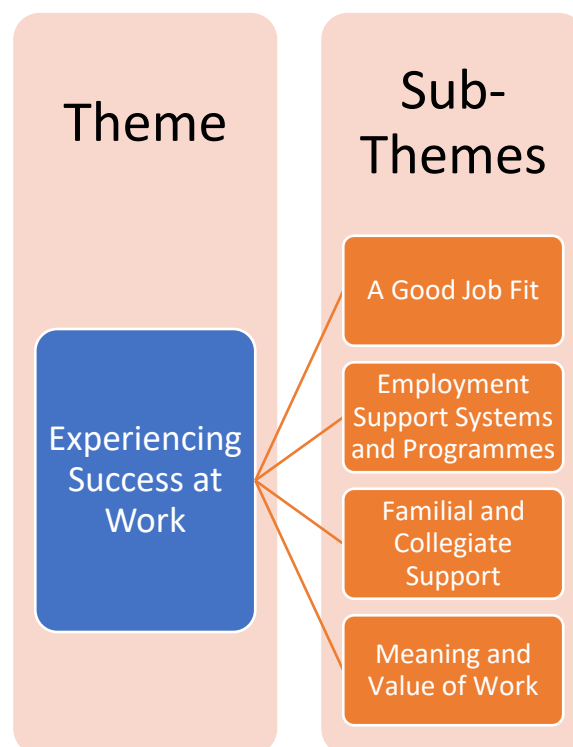


Figure 5.2 Experiencing Success at Work and sub-themes

5.2.4.1 A Good Job Fit

All the women were successful in gaining employment at some stage across their working journey, while not all managed to sustain employment on a long-term basis, many of the women did succeed in maintaining employment and they reflected on how a good job fit contributed to their success. They perceived and recognized that the concept of a good job

fit pertained to the alignment of their role and position with their personal attributes as an employee. Judith for example stated that:

“My current job is quite niche... I work in ‘technology sector’ which is a thing that suits me a lot because again it’s the really like attention to detail. Like so there are teams of developers who create the software and then we’re part of the testers who actually, you know, we play around with the software, we test, and we find out what’s wrong with it. And then we log bugs to the developer saying you need to fix this; it needs to do this.” (Judith).

The women also discussed how they made strategic use of their areas of strength and passions to guide their work, this was a similar finding to the theme from study one; *Education Paths*, which depicted how the women often chose courses associated with their interests. Ciara discussed how she had a love of learning and how this passion drove and supported her working career:

“I get fascinated by something and I’m just passionate about whatever it is. I find it much easier to be engaged if I’m passionate. So, again, I think there is a through line all the way through what I say, and it’s always that, it’s important to be passionate about whatever it is you’re doing, because it allows all the hard stuff to be easier. Hard stuff won’t be so hard if you’re interested, it won’t be as hard if you’re passionate, because you’re willing to take more of the difficulties, you’re willing to engage with those obstacles.” (Ciara).

Martina discussed how she has used her “interests” (Martina) which was established and developed in her childhood into her long working history.

“Turning my passion... Like it’s kind of like, I get to make a living out of something that I actually love doing.” (Martina).

Central and integral to the success of certain women in the study in their professional endeavours was the utilisation of their autistic identity as a driving force in shaping their working roles. Alex, Martina, Brid, Leah, and Sarah all worked currently or in the past in the field of autism. The women observed that they utilised their strengths in their respective professional working roles. Brid, for instance recalled her strong connection with autistic children, as a trainer and educator:

“I love what I do. I love working with autistic people.... I related really strongly to the autistic kids, and these would be kids often with big needs or often not.” (Brid).

For some, particularly; Alex and Martina, autism was a particular area of passion. Martina recalled how her passions have developed over the years and more recently with her knowledge of her own diagnosis, she has used this experience to educate and train people. Her self-employment journey was an extension of this area of passion and strength, and this supported her to develop and grow her business over time:

“Well Autism has been my special interest for the past six years since I nearly... on Saturday it'll be six years since I found out, my 'autaversary'. So yeah, so basically for six years like Autism has been my special interest.... I suppose because my special interests are my work and my work is my special interest, they're going to influence each other, you know. And yeah, I suppose that's just what's... that's why because they're going along the same kinds of paths as I am and the same you know, as I grow, they grow, you know. Well, the ideas grow.” (Martina).

Alex also talked about how identity drove her work:

“I suppose I found my special interest for Autism... like I found a way to channel it and I just, I ended up becoming part of the organisation really.” (Alex).

Embarking on a path of self-employment was also seen as a positive contributor to a good fit for the women in maintaining work. As discussed, three of the women were currently self-employed at the time of the study. The women appeared to thrive and gained a lot of satisfaction from navigating a self-employed path. Self-employment was seen as an opportunity to develop one's own working culture and environment:

“I just like set up my own little work, created me own little world with all these lovely kids', you know, and I actually just had my own lovely happy world that you know, was my work life and it was pretty cool. So, again, you know, I suppose rather than kind of having accommodations for myself and work or supports or anything like that, I just do what I need to do.” (Martina).

Developing a career through self-employment negated the need to conform to societies normative expectations in seeking employment via the typical working routes and systems. By accessing employment through this manner, Martha explained:

“I was lucky that I had this job waiting for me when I finished. So, I didn't have... a lot of people have to do a lot of applying, a lot of interviews and are trying to make their skills fit a job and figure out what they want to do, and I didn't have to do any of that. Which is lucky because they are all the things, I would have found very difficult.” (Martha).

Moreover, it enabled the women to manage and regulate their own work schedules and routines and provided an alternative to the mainstream work with its inherent demands and pressures.

“I am self-employed so I can pick and choose what assignments I do.” (Martha).

Equally it offered the women an opportunity to manage other competing roles in their lives:

“Gives me a good work/life balance... be a mam and do everything all at once. So yeah, so work for me isn't like I suppose how other people might see work. It's actually kind of going somewhere, doing something I enjoy and getting paid for it, which is cool, which is great.” (Martina).

5.2.4.2 Employment Support Systems and Programmes

Many of the women secured work via mainstream employment systems, nevertheless five of the women (Sally, Judith, Leah, Ciara, and Grace) at various points in their working journeys sought and benefited from specialist employment support systems and programmes to assist them in procuring and sustaining employment, previously alluded to in Study One. Sally described how she accessed disability recruitment agencies and programmes at three junctures in her professional working journey. These are the sole means by which she secured employment. However, this is not the case for Judith, Ciara, Leah, and Grace, they previously accessed employment via mainstream systems, but struggled to secure employment, and so they accessed these supports on a needs basis. Judith specifically utilised a disability recruitment agency to secure employment following her diagnosis and on completion of a postgraduate course. She found the disability recruitment agency while online, searching for employment. She explained why she accessed the support:

“I was kind of very kind of worried about how I was going to find a job and given my struggle before and how... Yeah, what happened in my previous job, that I ended up not being able to do it at all. And yeah, the fact that there was someone there to help. I don't think... As soon as I knew they existed, I don't think I imagined doing anything else really. It was just the obvious choice....” (Judith).

While Leah described why she availed of a public employment route:

“I suppose I found it really difficult to even get called for an interview, so like in all of the CVs that I put out, and I don’t know why that is, I don’t know whether like what I’m doing wrong to not even get called? You know what I mean? Like, I’ve applied but at the time I remember applying to loads of jobs and not even getting a response.” (Leah).

By accessing these specialist employment routes, the women were supported in managing the job application process.

“They helped me kind of do a couple of mock interviews and stuff and helped me to do that because I hadn’t done that in a very, very long time either...” (Judith).

As well as benefiting from general advice and guidance, practical advice was also dispensed as described by Sally:

“And ‘NAME OF SUPPORT WORKER’ did say to me, ‘Well you know, you’re not required to wear make-up there, no law saying that you have to wear make-up or high heels or don’t worry about it’. But I was worried about it. Things like that, make-up and, I’ve no clue of make-up.” (Sally).

Sally, Judith, Grace and Ciara, utilised disability recruitment programs. As a result, they indirectly disclosed their autistic identity:

“I had to disclose. It had to be part of the process and that’s never been, that’s never happened to me before. So, I had to go into it knowing that I would actually have to say I’ve a disability. I said, ‘Look, I am applying for this, and I have a disability.’” (Ciara).

This disclosure supported the implementation of reasonable accommodations both during the interview stage, whereby *“someone from (the disability recruitment agency) came with me to the interviews as well and sat in on them”* (Judith). Moreover, the act of disclosure facilitated the implementation of reasonable accommodations within the workplace for the women. These accommodations were tailored individually, reflecting the unique needs of the women. Ciara described how she engaged in a reasonable accommodation assessment in advance of commencing a new position:

“They do an assessment piece and they kind of looked at my assessment and they tried to figure out how best I could be. I could, what’s the word, I could work in this environment. Now it was difficult, don’t get me wrong it was a long auld journey, I think it was about two hours each way. So, four hours each way to get from my home in ‘name of homeplace’ all the way over there and that was tiring... But because of the assessment I was able to get a small little room. It was a little box room... about a cell size. But to me it was brilliant because it gave me enough time to relax after I came in from the bus.” (Ciara).

Like Ciara, Judith also availed of the use of environmental supports and adaptations to support her in her work role.

“The only little accommodations really, I started off with, were just requesting that my desk was near a window so that I got plenty of natural light and I kind of – I guess not too surrounded by people and business, like I was at the edge. And just checking that it was OK for me to sit with my headphones on.” (Judith).

She further elaborated on the use of environmental adaptations. Judith presented her “headphones” in the second interview as her prop to further elaborate on her work experiences. She discussed the need for the use accommodations in her workplace, and the benefit of them:

“They make a massive difference in my ability to work, basically. And without being able to wear them a lot of the time, I don’t think I’d have a job. So, I figured in some ways that they’re a sort of significant accommodation and just generally help me function.” (Judith).

Some of the women in their working roles (Sally, Sarah, Judith) also benefited from the support of a “mentoring programme” (Sarah). For some of the women they were met regularly by their “mentor” (Sally), or when the women required it. The mentors appeared to act as confidants and advisers for the women and supported them in both the settling in periods, and in progressing in their jobs. Sarah explained:

“I’m lucky because we have our mentoring programme in ‘name of workplace’ and I got put with a mentor who happens to be a ‘support person’ as well and she’s been really supportive and kind of even kicking me up the ass a little bit and saying like you know, ‘You can stand up for what you think, like your opinions and stuff are valid, you don’t have to go along with what everyone else says, don’t assume you’re wrong all the time’, kind of thing. So, that’s been helpful.” (Sarah).

While Sally's narrative highlighted the task-based support provided by her mentor:

"We would meet on a Wednesday afternoon usually.... She was lovely now. She was my mentor for three months... She was in a different office. The same section as I was in but she was in a different office, so she had a general idea of the work that I was doing." (Sally).

In addition to accessing employment programmes, two of the women; Sally and Martha also benefited from the financial support systems available to them as autistic individuals. This financial support is known as the *"disability allowance"* (Sally) in Ireland and was utilised by the women to support them in maintaining their work.

Sally depended on the social welfare payment to support her, as she explained:

"I have that security still of being on social welfare and get some of my payments still and knowing that if I find myself out of work..., knowing that that security is still there for me, kind of having the free travel, the medical card. Now that sort of stuff is important." (Sally).

However, Martha explained how the pressures of being self-employed can create instability in her life from a financial perspective. She therefore supported herself in maintaining self-employment, by availing of the financial assistance of the disability allowance.

"I qualify for DA (disability allowance) so that's a big part of it, it wouldn't be possible otherwise... I think it suits me very well because like I say I am lucky enough to be in a profession where between the profession and DA (disability allowance) I have the capacity to work two and a half days a week and still tick over financially." (Martha).

5.2.4.3 Familial and Collegiate Support

In examining the women's efforts to manage their work duties on a daily basis, their network of co-workers and family members were commonly identified by the women as mechanisms of support. This support network either directly supported the women with work-related matters or supported the women indirectly by facilitating their engagement in the workforce. While engaging in employment, some of the women referred to how they

benefited from the support of their supervisors and managers. Sarah highlighted how a *“relationship between an employee and an employer, like the direct manager.... is crucial to being successful at work or being happy at work”* (Sarah). Ciara explained:

“My manager was really very clear and a very concise communicator which was very good...I was like Jesus if I could pay for people to be as clear at communicating it would make my life so much easier. We’d have our probably daily talks, we’d just sit down and have a five-minute talk about what work was going to happen, what we were going to do and what kind of was the expected thing for the week which I found very useful. She was very aware of me, in particular. She used to keep a good eye on that. And I think that’s really just very good management skills, hugely good...I think paired with a good communication style, was very, very supportive.. It supported me very significantly at the start of my work, very significantly, when I was learning the ropes, and I was frequently getting overwhelmed.” (Ciara).

As well as managers, the women also attributed their success at work to the support received from their co-workers and colleagues. Ciara described some of her colleagues as being like a *“family”*. While for Brid, her close bond with her colleagues was and continues to be important:

“The colleagues were a pretty supportive bunch locally and you know, I was talking to one of them last night even though I’m five years out of it now. So, we were good to each other.” (Brid).

While Judith referred to how the personality traits and characteristics of her fellow colleagues supported her personally within the workplace:

“Like it’s quite stereotypically I mean a very introverted team... I think generally as a whole my team would be described as fairly introverted; I think. Possibly partly because of the kind of job we do – probably attracts more introverted people, so yeah. Like we’re all quite quiet. Most of us sit at a desk with the headphones on with music on or something and just kind of get on with things... In some ways, it’s an advantage in my current job because it uses my skills that are better because I’m autistic.” (Judith).

The women's familial support systems which involved parents, siblings and partners played a crucial role in assisting the women with the intricacies of their professional responsibilities. Four of the women (Angela, Leah, Sarah, and Martina) were mothers and balanced their professional working position with their mothering position. Two of them

noted the support from their family which allowed them to co-navigate these roles. Sarah explained:

"I have a lot of support. Usually, my husband's parents you know, take the kids a lot and stuff so. Like I have a good kind of support network." (Sarah).

While the presence of siblings also provided significant support, as described by Ciara:

"I just love my sisters, I'm so lucky, 'researcher's name', I have such a good relationship with my sisters. We're so open with each other, we're so honest with each other, we can talk about literally anything. And not only that, they can challenge me as well, they're good at challenging. They don't let me just, you know, say nice things and leave. They kind of go, okay, let's actually talk about this, let's dig down. And they can tell me things that I don't want to hear. They often tell me things I don't want to hear. But that's fine, I'm absolutely perfect with them saying to me, you're being an idiot, don't do that, or have you really thought about this, or this is not a good idea – that's another one, this is not a good idea....

She's there for me, she's willing to do stuff, she's always willing to talk through things with me. She's always been very helpful." (Ciara).

Some of the women (Leah, Judith, Sarah, and Martina) acknowledged and appreciated the support that their partner provided to them in relation to being a confidant in their work. The presence and support of Judith's husband is very evident throughout her story and was central to her success at navigating her working journey. Judith's husband is a constant source of support, both emotionally, and financially. It is evident how pivotal he has been in her working life. Judith described:

"I was lucky enough I at least lived with my boyfriend at the time, now husband. I'm not sure quite what I would have done without him." (Judith).

During Judith's time off work and re-engagement in education, the level of support from her husband was undulating. She was not required to work as he financially supported her at that time. More recently as Judith contemplated giving up work and began negotiating her shorter working week, she highlighted how her husband supported her:

"Like I mean I count myself incredibly lucky that we could survive financially if I didn't work. I mean, 'name of husband' not like really comfortably, we'd be okay. Like my husband's job is decent. Like we own our house." (Judith).

Judith referred to how her husband also supported her emotionally; within her narrative she described how he was a good balance with her:

“Obviously like in any relationship, if he’s better at something, then I’m worse at it and then we balance each other in some ways. I tend to overthink things and worry about things and try and do things too thoroughly and too perfectly and he’s a bit more live in the moment, impulsive kind of don’t about it kind of thing.”
(Judith).

She also explained how he has a good understanding of her and how this further supported her:

“Yeah. It’s funny. I’d say sometimes – I think I might have said this last time – it’s almost like he understands me better than I do, which is kind of cool. I guess the benefit of a kind of external view can be really helpful... So, he can see when that’s happening and kind of say, OK, you’ve had enough now. I’ll leave you alone and you need to rest kind of thing. It’s hard for me sometimes to realise when I’m getting tired and extra literal or extra sensitive to sound or just extra not coping with things very well. Sometimes when it’s you, it’s hard to tell when that’s happening. But because he has an external view, he can see when that’s happening, so he can tell me before I notice. And then, yeah, I can sort of go and chill out and rest and come back the next day when I have more energy again. And it’s really nice to have someone.” (Judith).

She referred to her husband as being the only person that she can truly be herself:

“He’s basically the only person that I never ever have to wear any kind of neurotypical mask in front of, which is really nice. And I can be totally and utterly me she can be totally utterly herself.” (Judith).

This constant level of support from her husband is a strong feature of her success in the negotiating and managing her work, and the presence of family and colleagues also supported the women at work.

5.2.4.4 Meaning and Value of Work

Despite encountering challenges in their work and barriers to their work journeys, the women expressed a sense of accomplishment and perceived value in their employment and professional roles. Work for three of the women was seen as being “important” (Sarah,

Ciara, and Sally) and the significance and meaning of work was seen in diverse ways by the women. For two of the women, Ciara and Sally, work instilled a sense of purpose. Sally described:

"I think it just gives me, or gets me a purpose for the morning, a reason to get up, to get out and to meet people. I suppose it does get very isolating at home and I like being able to say to somebody else 'I do work. I do have a job.' That, you know when I bump into someone say that I might have went to school with years ago or say a neighbour and you know that question 'What are you doing with yourself now Sally? Are you studying, working, what?' and it's nice to be able to say 'Yes, I have a job'." (Sally).

Ciara highlighted in her narrative how she saw work as "enjoyable" and discussed the perceived sense of fulfilment and value from her past and current roles.

"I was voted as a 'Valued Champion' in my last job because I epitomised the 'NAME OF ORGANISATION' values of care, compassion, trust, and learning. And in my new job I was also nominated for a few kinds of quality assurance together kind of roles...I suppose as I move forward in work my confidence has gone massively higher than I've ever had... Also feeling valued in work has been very, very useful to me because again, I've always done very well in college and school but it's harder to feel valued in that scenario (work) because there's loads of people that are doing very well and are very good. But I suppose when you do a good job in your actual work, even if it's a bit of thanks sometimes, there is a lot of positive feedback you can get back which is very positive and again, very good for your confidence. So, I suppose work for me has been great because it's improved my confidence." (Ciara).

Jenny maintained that work fostered a strong sense of identity and belonging for her personally, highlighting the deeper meaning and understanding of the multifaceted nature of work and its profound implications for these women, ultimately attributing to a sense of success.

"I think it's important for myself... because it's part of your identity to do something in your community and to have a schedule every day. People don't just want to sit around and do nothing. They want to be part of a group and they want to enable each other to do things." (Jenny).

While for Angela, work was a necessity, as it provided her with stimulation:

"I do need the... I do need a job because I find like when they're (kids) out of school there's only so many coffees you want to go for and it's just not a full... For me it's

not an option not to work. I'd prefer to work... I like the way it makes my brain work you know, because I have to think and I have to you know, you get lost in a project and doing something.... It's giving you that out of your head and you have to focus on a certain thing and it's the progress that you make and learning stuff."
(Angela).

While for four of the women (Jenny, Angela, Ciara, and Sarah) the financial aspect of work also held a priority and meaning for the women.

"I really like working. I'm not happy to not work. I like working full-time right now because I get more money... I do feel really lucky that I have a job because I know a lot of people really struggle to be in employment and you know, I have a decent salary."
(Sarah).

5.2.4.5 Summary of Experiencing Success at Work

As evident from the theme: *Experiencing Success at Work*, the women attributed and credited their success in participating in the world of work to a diverse array of supports and systems. For some of the women they referred to the benefit of a good job fit, whereby the work and its associated tasks fit with the women's interests and skillset. Several of the women utilised their areas of interests and passions to drive their work path and some utilised their autistic identity to work within the autism arena. Despite some of the women not disclosing to their employers, as evident in the findings presented in Study One, we see that some of the women benefited from disclosure and having access to specialist employment supports which enabled them to secure and maintain employment. This also relates to how accommodating work environments and access to reasonable accommodations further enabled and supported the women to participate in work. Some of the women attributed their family and their collegiate support system as an enabler for work, while many of the women valued work and the purpose it provided them which further supported them to participate and engage within the workplace.

5.2.5 Employers - What they should know

The women highlighted ways to enhance the working world to better support autistic women in their working roles. A multifaceted approach was deemed necessary to facilitate successful employment outcomes and enable autistic women to thrive in their professional roles. Their stories highlighted the importance for employers to welcome and embrace neurodivergent individuals in the workplace through a series of measures and recommendations outlined by the sub-themes of: *Better Understanding and Awareness*, *Inclusive Adaptations* and *Benefit of employing neurodivergent people*.

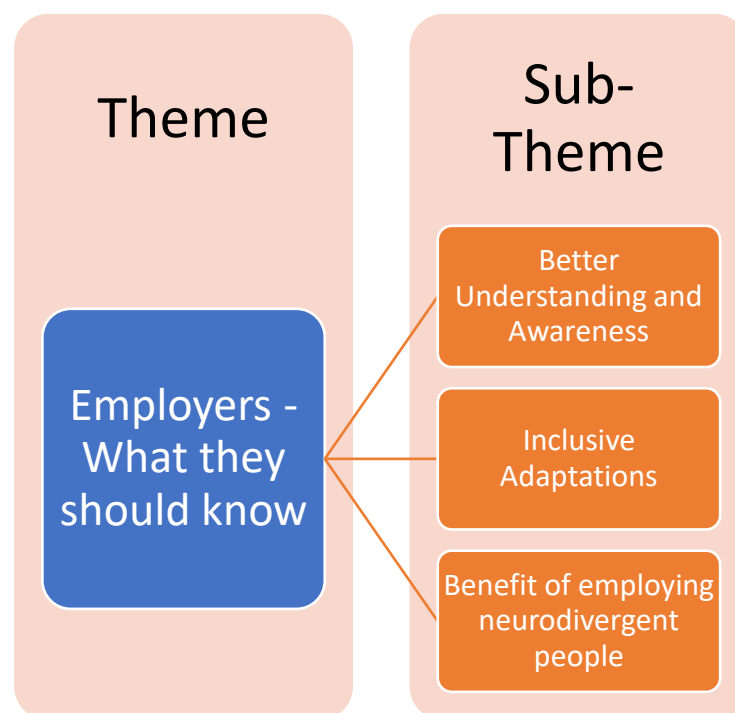


Figure 5.3 Employers - What they should know and sub-themes

5.2.5.1 Better Understanding and Awareness

Study One highlighted that there was a lack of understanding and awareness of autism in society, and the findings of Study Two further confirmed this, most of the women maintained that there was a significant lack of awareness and understanding of autism amongst employers and employees they encountered. Sarah highlighted that there was “*a lot of ignorance*” (Sarah) from employers:

"I just don't think my colleagues understand Autism for a start." (Sarah).

While Leah held the view that there was *"very little understanding of autism"* and *"a huge amount of work to be done"* (Leah) to increase understanding and raise awareness regarding support for autistic individuals at work. Leah maintained that the widespread lack of comprehension of autism in society, was influencing the lack of understanding within management:

"Psychology Today, three days ago, an article was published called, 'Autistics as undomesticated humans'. So, you know when you have researchers saying shit like that about people, you can't really blame some middle manager in 'name of place' for not knowing what autism is.... there is very little understanding, very little" (Leah).

She further explained how employers needed to know that *"generally in every workplace there is going to be at least one neuro-diverse person whether you know it or not"* and therefore it was imperative that employers increased their awareness and knowledge of the issues facing the autistic community in work.

Consequently, the women were convinced that the initial and most crucial step was *"to start with how people understand Autistic people"* (Martina) and to *"get training"* (Leah). Training was most frequently identified as a beneficial measure and an advantageous action for implementation within the workplace. The women believed that awareness training would enable the workforce to support autistic individuals and challenge the misperceptions often associated with autism. The women wished to move away from socio-normative labelling of differences as deficits, but instead recognise the diversity of autistic individuals, as explained by Grace:

"The way to improve this is really to inform people and train staff and train managers but a lot more than it is. For example, if you have somebody who comes in in the workplace who has a disability, it makes sense to me that as part of an induction training there would be an induction training for all your staff about that specific disability to promote communication and about it, to break down taboos and misinformation, all those things. That doesn't exist." (Grace).

In addition to training, the women recommended, routine and frequent discussions between employers and autistic employees around their strengths, needs and potential supports. They advocated that employers need to *“get to know the real you and know what you can offer”* (Alex). Four of the women (Leah, Alex, Martina, and Judith) referred to how employers need to develop a relationship and collaboration by:

“Listening to autistic people, listening to autistic people... talk to autistic people.”
(Leah).

The concept of self-advocacy played a pivotal role in the women’s stories and their views on how they could be supported within the workplace were voiced. They maintained that having the means and tools to assist and support employers in their understanding and comprehension, and sharing information for mutual benefit, once the employer was willing to listen, would be a support for both them and employers:

“Start at understanding Autistics and who we are and what makes us function and why we like things and that we love to work on things that we love doing.... It’s like understand who we are first, you need to do all of that.” (Martina).

These practical and easily implemented supports were beneficial, with no costs associated. However, the women highlighted how employers need to be open and *“willing to talk about”* (Judith), the experiences and needs of autistic women, taking *“it seriously when we explain things or what we struggle with and why”* (Judith) and that by doing so can allow and provide for responsive and tailored support within the workplace, as well as promote positive self-identity. Highlighted within the narratives was the concept of heterogenous experiences by autistic women within work. The women identified that employers must be aware that to initiate change for autistic employees, it is crucial to comprehend the individual and tailor approaches to their needs. Judith explained:

“I think because we are all so different, the best thing that employers can do is to speak to the specific person about what their difficulties are and what accommodations they might need and genuinely listen... There’s not really a broad general thing to do really. That’s the interesting thing with autism and disability. You know like a physical disability that puts someone in a wheelchair, it’s pretty obvious what accommodations they need and it’s very similar for all of them. It’s

ramps and lifts and disabled toilets and that sort of thing, whilst then you can't really do the same thing for autistic people because we're all so different and we all have different problems and different needed accommodations. So, yeah, it has to be specific to the person." (Judith).

Furthermore, given that all autistic individuals are unique the women recommended that employers needed to be *"more flexible"* (Sally) in their approaches to best support autistic women.

5.2.5.2 Inclusive Adaptations

The women highlighted the need to focus on identifying and removing barriers within the workplace, as well as creating inclusive environments and offering reasonable accommodations to the working systems. Evident in the narratives was the women's perception that there is a vital need to move away from trying to change the 'individual' and instead to recognise and make changes within the environment, that are potential barriers to engagement and participation to work. Once again there was a significant push to move away from a neuro-normative perspective to make way for all individuals. The women expressed a wish that adaptations, changes, and simple modifications to the environment would benefit all employees within the workplace, not just autistic employees, as explained by Leah:

"Make places more inclusive without it being a big, 'Look, we made this space for you' you know what I mean? That it just becomes more normalised, that when you're having a meeting you can say to people, 'If anybody needs to step out of the room, we have a quiet space', that that was just a normal thing, that it wasn't a, 'We're doing this because you're special.' More that it was just normalised. That things like captions on videos were normalised. That all of the things that people, neuro-diverse people can benefit from.... these adjustments that we can make could be made for everybody and I think if those adjustments were made and there were allowances made for some people would work better." (Leah).

Similar to Study One, the women highlighted how aspects of the environment were a barrier and challenging to negotiate and had a cumulative impact on their self-management at work. Therefore, the women identified that changes to the sensory and physical work environment to make it more inclusive would be beneficial. They suggested that these modifications to the environment would not be *"huge changes"* as Angela said:

“Basic... Like making sure that lighting is natural as possible” (Sally).

Furthermore, other environmental adjustments included reducing noise and offering:

“A room, a quiet room that you can book into or go into, that has no telephones, you're not to talk in there or whatever. That you're going in to have quiet time. It just, even sometimes it's just for ten minutes.” (Angela).

Notwithstanding these modifications to the environment, the women also felt the need for adaptations and changes to be made to the typical work structures or practices and systems. The traditional recruitment process of a job description, job application and interview hiring processes were perceived to be biased against autistic individuals who engage socially in different ways. They described how they were discontented with the interview process:

“The thing that really bugs me is that your ability to do a job interview basically has no correlation at all with your ability to do a job, as far as I can tell. I think it's an incredibly flawed system of working out who should get jobs because... Yeah, it bears very little relationship to what you actually do in your job on a day-to-day basis.” (Judith).

Additionally, they emphasised the challenge employers faced in accurately acknowledging and accounting for the person they were employing:

“Instead of doing this weird interview system where everyone is trying to not show themselves but show a good example of who you'll never be, just the interview system doesn't make the slightest bit of sense to me because obviously like if I was hiring somebody I'd want to know who I was hiring, I wouldn't want to know who they think who like who I think – who they think I want them to be.” (Alex).

5.2.5.3 Benefit of employing neurodivergent people

The women maintained that insufficient support provided in the workplace negatively impacted autistic women being *“underemployed or unemployed”* (Jenny). Notwithstanding this they not only perceived that autistic individuals were not only missing out but also

emphasised that employers were overlooking the valuable contributions from neurodivergent employees in the workplace. They suggested that employers would *“benefit a lot from employing... neurodivergent people”* (Jenny) and that they should go outside their *“comfort zone”* (Jenny) and invest in supporting autistic individuals in the workplace. They highlighted how employers needed to reframe their perspectives of what makes a ‘good employee’ and referred to how employers *“really overvalue their extroverted sort of team interaction, over other skills”* (Judith). They suggested that if employers *“remove the requirement to be good at those things, there’s still a massive amount of really useful work you can do”* (Judith). Identifying strengths was considered to encourage employers to assume competence and ability, rather than defining an individual by their challenges and their own assumptions. The women referred to the *“advantages to an autistic brain”* (Leah) and the *“kind of things that can be very useful in work”* (Ciara).

The women reported several strengths and advantages that they believed were valuable within the workplace. Firstly, the women spoke about several cognitive advantages and strengths including *“observation”* and *“attention to detail”* (Judith). Jenny explained how this supported her at work, and was a key strength over others within her workplace:

“I’m extremely good with detail, like attention to detail. When I have to do small tasks, I won’t make mistakes and people always give me stuff to proofread, even if it’s not my native language, because I will find your mistake. I will find the tiniest mistake that you make, just because my brain works that way.” (Jenny).

For Ciara, her attention to detail, offered her the opportunity to have superior pattern recognition skills which facilitated her in her role, as well utilising concentration skills to ensure reliability of work tasks:

“The ability to see the linkages between small things. Like, focus now onto very minute details, and sometimes as well see the bigger picture. But I’m better at small details. So, they’re the kind of things that can be very useful in work, super useful, super detailed focus, super concentration, attention to detail, those kind of big benefits in work.” (Ciara).

Additionally, the women also recalled superior memory skills, which allowed them to retain a great deal of information. This skill was particularly important for Martha in her role as a translator:

"I think I have a very good memory for which I think is a bonus. And I think that has helped with, so well I don't know you know, you don't want to brag either and I don't want to (with job) ..." (Martha).

In addition, they stated how they had a *"different way of thinking, problem solving, and creativity"* (Jenny) and had *"interesting thoughts and interesting perspective"* (Ciara) that they bring to the workplace. Many of the women highlighted how they were able to use these skills in their daily work:

"I'm quite creative. I like doing the web design and the presentations and picking images and making things look nice.... I know how to share information with people in a more kind of creative way." (Sarah).

Sarah also described how she used her originality and creativity in applying for a job:

"I applied for a job just before Christmas and I didn't hear anything back so I ended up emailing the CEO, I just wanted to know, they didn't say that I hadn't got the job, I just wanted to check what happened and I got complimented on the fact that I'd done my CV, like I had the traditional CV but I'd also done an infographic CV where you could visually see like on a bar chart kind of the amount of time I'd spent in different roles and it was kind of colour coded." (Sarah).

Personal qualities were also identified as strengths that employers would benefit from. Three of the women reported being *"really honest"* (Alex) and being *"very resilient"* (Sarah). Angela reported how she adhered to a routine and therefore was reliable, she explains this as:

"I'm very predictable. Like as in I'll show up for work, I do what I need to do."
(Angela)

Many of the women also highlighted how they had a strong sense of justice and utilised this in work to support others. Jenny said:

"I have a strong sense of justice and I want to do something that helps people achieve their own dreams." (Jenny).

Leah explained how feels she is able to deal with emotions well and maintain boundaries in her work which she perceived was a strength, as explained:

“I’m able to park that when I’m talking to – especially a child – about something difficult. I know how to kind of keep my distance, you know? I would have good boundaries I suppose is the way you’d say it. And I actually think being autistic helps with that in a way. I actually do think it’s a strength, that not centering yourself. I think that is part... I think that is probably an autistic – for me. I’m not saying that’s for everyone. For me, I actually think it’s actually a strength to not get overly emotional when somebody – because it’s not about me. It’s about the children that I am working with.” (Leah).

Several of the women said that they had a desire for learning. Alex referred to being “a deep thinker” and being “inquisitive and curious” (Alex), while Ciara referred to how she is dedicated to her work with a strong ethic and genuine passion for learning which facilitated her learning new ways of working and in doing things:

“I’m always interested in new things, I’m passionate about learning new things, finding out new things, even stuff that I’m not particularly interested, if it’s new, I get really excited about just learning new things. So, I think that’s a big push that I have, in a baseline personality, I’m excited by novelty, it makes me very happy to find out new things.” (Ciara).

5.3 Summary of the Findings from Study Two

The preceding section of this chapter has presented the findings from Study Two which builds on the findings presented in Chapter Four, regarding the understanding of how these autistic women experience the world of work. More evident in the findings from Study Two, were the factors that supported the women and enabled the women at work. Although the women’s working journeys were impacted and influenced by many factors as presented in Study One and further confirmed in Study Two, the women demonstrated how the benefit of a good job fit with the women’s work related to their interests and skillset supported the women. Furthermore, support in the form of reasonable accommodations, specialist recruitment agencies, family and colleagues supported these women to be successful within work. Additionally, the findings identified how success at

work can be supported by employers and the women shared their advice and perspectives into how the work environment can best support autistic women to thrive.

5.4 Findings from Study Three: Participant's Perspectives on the Research

This section presents the findings from Study Three, which provides reflections on the research process from the perspective of the women who participated in the study. Given that this research study centralised the voice of autistic women, it was imperative that the women had the opportunity to share their thoughts on their experiences of telling their work story and on the research process itself. Specifically, the women were asked to share their perspectives at the end of the second interview. Their perspectives were analysed as described in section 3.9.2 in the Methodology Chapter and are presented in the next section.

5.4.1 The Women's Perspectives on the Research

The women's perspectives on their involvement in the research is presented by the theme; Women's Perspectives on the Research under three sub-themes: *Perceptions of the Research Process*, *Participant Benefits* and *Motivations for involvement*.

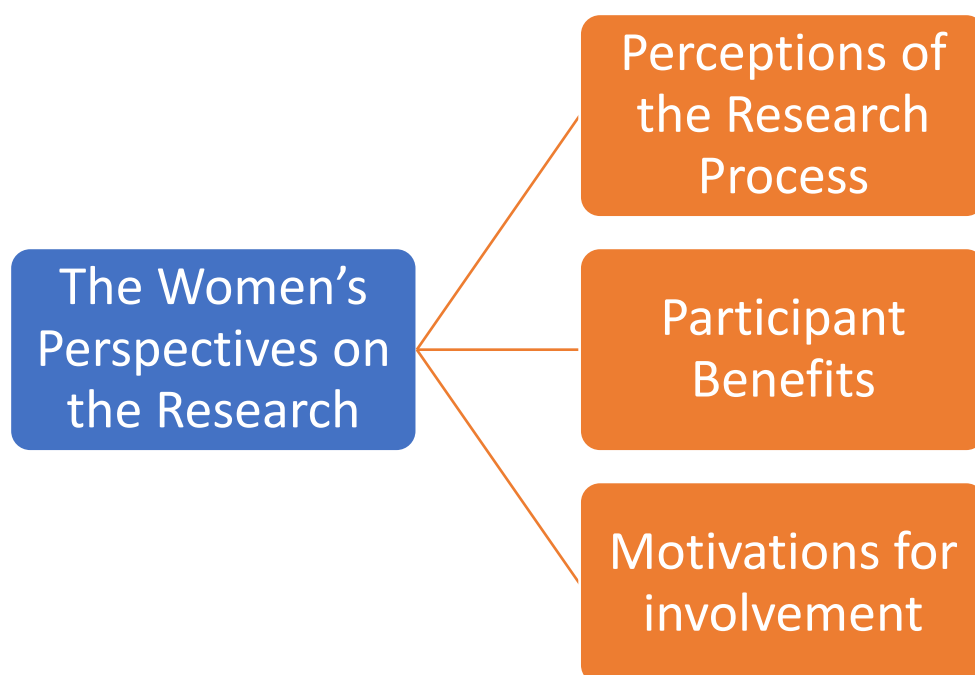


Figure 5.4 The Women's Perspectives on the Research and Sub-themes

5.4.1.1 Perceptions of the Research Process

The women appreciated the openness and flexibility of the research process. Many of the women discussed how the initial interview allowed them the opportunity to make decisions in how they wished to tell their work stories without the confines of a structured interview format. It allowed them to move away from being a passive research subject, providing them with control over what and how they chose to disclose their work-related experiences. The women described how they felt “comfortable” (Martina) with the open research question at the outset and signalled how it allowed for open discourse.

“There needs to be a lot of flexibility in autism research, you don’t see in a lot of autism research. It’s an everybody answers this same questionnaire and everybody you know what I mean and then you extrapolate from that. Whereas that’s not giving because.. it’s a neurological difference it affects everybody differently. No two autistic people are going to have, and I know this is the same with everything but it’s such a profound difference in that if you don’t have flexibility in your research, you’re going to have confirmation bias. If you’re asking the questions, you’re going to find that you’re getting the answers that you want to have whereas this kind of flexibility is giving you... I’m not just giving you what I think you want and that does happen with other ones... so this ability to have flexibility in researching I think is a good thing... I suppose that’s a really good part of it, of setting out the parameters and then kind of, they’re not very, very rigid. I suppose it’s about that flexibility of being like, so this worked for me.” (Leah).

Further to this, conducting the interviews online, although not in the original plan for the research, was seen by the women as being effective and was deemed to be more accessible for them practically.

“I think the Skype actually works better for me than going into town or in person or anything. And again, the interviews are quite long so not having to travel, it saves a lot of time you know. Like if you were going into town to talk and doing a couple of hours and coming back, that’s kind of the whole day would be the interview process. (Martha).

Most of the women were interviewed via different virtual channels choosing the most appropriate and accessible channel to them. The women had the opportunity to choose their own environment in which they were interviewed virtually, and this further supported the women to be comfortable in their own space such as their bedroom, garden,

or office space. For one of the participants, Brid, she highlighted how she was engaging in an activity to support her during the interview:

“I’m actually knitting now just to regulate myself as we’re going.” (Brid).

The second interview provided more structure, and this was identified by the women. They appreciated the prompts to elaborate further on points previously discussed and the new questions posed. The phrasing of the questions was also appreciated, particularly those with a strengths-based focus:

“What I thought was really nice in your questions was that you were asking about the skills that you have, what are you strong about, and how would you see your future, what’s your ideal job. I think those are really nice questions to ask to... For me even to acknowledge, do you think I have skills? And I do think I’m really good at things, so it’s really nice to have a platform and an opportunity to remember those, to identify those, and to communicate them. So, I think it’s nice that you’re asking that question.” (Grace).

Most of the women stated that they *“didn’t find anything hard”* (Martina) about the format of the research, identifying that they found it easy to engage in the interviews and with me as the researcher. Leah referred to the fact that she found it beneficial to know that I, the researcher had experience of working with autistic women and she acknowledged this importance for herself:

“It was good to hear your background. Not that we needed to, you didn’t owe me anything, but it was good to hear that you had an awareness and you had worked with people who are autistic and that you knew autistic people and you know what I mean? Like, that was important to me actually.” (Leah).

While there were many positives perceived by the women, some did highlight some of the challenges associated with the research process (Leah, Jenny, and Martha). This mainly centered around how the interviews and the research process may have been *“a bit long maybe”* (Jenny), while acknowledging the depth of the study. Furthermore, Leah highlighted how it was difficult for her to make initial contact to engage in the study but benefited from the snowball sampling utilised for recruitment:

“Initially getting in contact with you was difficult. Making myself do that was difficult but that’s the same for everybody I think, it’s, that was the demand, whether it’s not meant to be a demand or anything but actually doing it was a demand for me... Having to get over that whole, I’m probably not who you want to talk to, that whole negative self-talk stuff... But once I got over that and once, we started the process that was okay... But I think when other people saw people saying, in one of the autistic spaces I am in somebody said that they had done this and that they had found it good and whatever and that made it easier to contact you. (Leah).

5.4.1.2 Participant Benefits

The women were asked about their involvement in the research, however, the analysis identified that there were perceived benefits arising from their participation. Many of the women (Ciara, Angela, Leah, Grace, and Jenny) regarded it as an enlightening experience, with an opportunity for them to think and reflect on themselves and their experiences:

“Very useful – so always good to reflect. I always do find talking to other people, let’s me crystallise my own experience as well. So, saying it out loud gives you an opportunity to actually talk about what matters to you and what’s your impression. ... It’s the benefit of actually talking to someone about something that is probably... you don’t get to talk about very often. --- I don’t get to talk at length about what I find challenging, what I find decent about work. Because not many people have the time. So, very useful in that sort of way. It’s been a very interesting experience.” (Ciara).

For some of the women, the interviews allowed an avenue in which to express and process their own personal emotions and thoughts. In telling their stories the women had an opportunity to reflect on their lives in empowering ways. Leah referred to the interview experience as providing some personal relief:

“Cathartic, is that probably the word to use? I found it good as I said, you don’t get opportunities to talk about this kind of stuff. As you can see, I can talk about it for a very long time and I don’t get to talk about it to people very much because I am aware of how overwhelming me blurting, like just unloading all of this on somebody would be.” (Leah).

While Angela, highlighted how the interviews supported her understanding of herself and enabled her to achieve a sense of perspective:

“It made my diagnosis sit with me and realise oh yeah, that’s why I do that and not. And I have no judgement in it. Do you know, I’ve no expectation from it and I hadn’t anyway prior to this. But like you know, I look and like I hadn’t said it to anyone. I said it to ‘FRIEND’ and ‘FRIEND’ and ‘HUSBAND’. Okay, so that’s it. That’s still who I’ve said it to, I haven’t said it to anyone. And it just makes my life feel less chaotic having discussed it with somebody that I didn’t need to discuss it... there’s been a lot of growth in me” (Angela).

Grace, Ciara, and Jenny declared that their participation provided a platform for their experiences and narrative to be heard in *“an understandable kind of way”* (Ciara) and were appreciative to be *“listened”* (Jenny):

“The good thing about the research is I guess giving you a voice, so it’s not the first time, you know if you’re struggling with something and there’s an outlet there where they’re asking you or want to know from you what your experience is, this is what you need all the time like even at work, you need to be able to tell what you’re struggling with or whatever and this is an opportunity, it’s a shame it’s not more regular you know.” (Grace).

This reinforced Grace’s sense that her narrative held significance, further enhancing her self-worth and self-esteem:

“Thank you again for the opportunity and thank you for being so I guess grateful because it gives me some worth or some sense of value that I can really do with so it will not be wasted on me that’s for sure.” (Grace).

5.4.1.3 Motivations for involvement

Given that the women devoted a considerable amount of time to the research interviews, they discussed their reasons for wanting to get involved. Evident across most of their narratives was the recognition that autistic women were missing from the mainstream autism conversation, and they were aware that existing literature and research often overlooked autistic women. Angela stated, *“that the world is this blinkered”* and it was against this backdrop that many of the women wanted to get involved:

“People are only just realising that autistic women exist and anything that studies autistic women specifically, I go, yes, me, me, I want to help. I want to help us get noticed and get help. People have actually realised we exist and understand us

and... So, yeah, if I can do anything to help that as well. That's always good."
(Judith).

The women wanted to highlight the need for research to be conducted with autistic women and furthermore in the area of employment and work. Many of the women were connected to various groups across the autistic community and wanted to represent not only their own personal views but to speak about the wider areas to address for the community:

"Women with autism in particular, are not very well researched, so any research to do with it, I think is very useful. As a woman with autism in work, I'm conscious and very aware of the difficulties involved in getting women with autism, into work, and how we keep them in work and what the scenario is with that. So, any research to do that, to hopefully let people know specific difficulties, or any difficulties, or any experiences, might be useful if someone reads it. So, I had a load of reasons to do it." (Ciara).

In participating they wanted to *"improve the knowledge on this subject"* (Ciara), perceiving knowledge as power and that you *"can't tackle a problem unless it is fully understood, and research is kind of the most important step in starting to understand an issue"* (Martha). They hoped that the study would improve professionals' knowledge and expand services and supports:

"The real-world implications of the impact that it will have on services, the impact it'll have on professionals and therefore on the people that they're meant to be helping." (Leah).

In addition to improving knowledge for professionals and impacting on services, the women also referred to how they hoped others, including other autistic women could benefit from the study. Regardless of whether it was *"only one sentence of what I said helps somebody else or backs up a point that somebody else made"* (Leah), the women hoped that the study would benefit others:

"I hope it will help autistic women get more support, and maybe this will be my future employment, to think about how to help autistic people be more employed. So, or have a more satisfying employment experience. Let's say it like that. Because I think a lot of people, autistic people, a lot more are employed than the studies say, because a lot of people aren't even diagnosed. So, they have jobs, but

often they are just exhausted, and usually you blame yourself. If you are struggling you think it's your fault, because you're just not strong enough, you're not disciplined enough, you are not smart enough, or I don't know, something like that." (Jenny).

While Angela hoped that it would support the future, in particular for her child:

"My objective would be that the world would kind of read this research. You'll do this research; they might take it on board. They might actually train teachers in how to deal with children with Autism rather than having one module in year four or year three, you know.... and that would be why I would do all of this research because I think that it's so important to do it for my child." (Angela).

Furthermore, the women wanted to shed light on the fact that autistic women can succeed in the workplace once they are supported and accepted, and wanted to highlight that women can be *"self-sufficient and have their own jobs"* (Jenny).

5.5 Summary of the Chapter

Over the preceding two chapters the findings from the qualitative interviews conducted with the twelve women have been presented. These findings chapters have presented firstly the findings from the first interviews with the women (Study One) and subsequently the findings from the second interviews with the women (Study Two). Particularly the findings have focused on how these women have experienced and navigated the world of work. This study builds on the paucity of research exploring and understanding the working lives of autistic graduate women.

Furthermore, Study Three presented the women's perspectives on the research. The insights garnered from these findings offer valuable information on the perspectives of those involved in the research process. They also shed light on the research design methods employed, providing guidance for future research practices.

In the next and final chapter, Chapter Six of this dissertation, the two findings' chapters will firstly be summarised, and the findings will be discussed in the context of the literature and theoretical frameworks, shedding light on how these findings create a foundation for knowledge-building, and potential change implementation.

6 Chapter Six - Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study sought to explore the experiences of autistic graduate women in navigating the world of work. A key aim was to build an understanding of the work journeys and experiences for these women and the influences on their experiences. The women's experiences were explored by an analysis of narratives. Across the two interviews the women shared their professional working journeys, as well as describing their insights on the factors that shaped their work experiences. This chapter provides a brief summary of the findings collectively from Study One and Study Two. It then discusses the principal findings in the context of existing literature and as well as a discussion on how these findings relate to theoretical perspectives. The findings from Study Three, the feedback from the participants will also be discussed in the context of the literature. The contribution that this research study brings to knowledge is outlined, together with implications for employers, work policy, the autistic community, autistic graduate women, and research practice. A critical evaluation of the study is presented with the strengths and limitations of the study outlined, as well as recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a brief reflection and concluding remarks.

6.2 Summary of Findings Chapters

The key findings from this study were presented in Chapter Four (Study One) and Chapter Five (Study Two and Three) in this thesis dissertation. These chapters presented the experiences of autistic graduate women as they navigated the world of work. The work journeys experienced by the women were revealed and the influences on their experiences as they negotiated the working world were presented. Additionally, the supports that enabled the women to navigate work were identified and discussed. As a secondary aim, the experiences, and perspectives of the women in participating in this research study was explored and presented.

The findings highlight the complex and interconnected factors experienced by the women in navigating the neurotypical working world, which was at odds with the neurodiversity perspective. Negative past experiences influenced the women's working experiences. From childhood many of the women have felt 'different' and that they 'never fit in'. Late diagnosis has exemplified these experiences, as they struggled to understand and situate their experiences. The women fear that they will be outed for being different. Problems within the work environment are internalized as 'them' being the problem. This can be conceptualised as a form of internal oppression which impacts on their sense of self, their self-esteem and can result in self-degradation. The women battled to manage their feelings of self-doubt and had trouble trusting in their decisions within work.

The social aspects of work, which traverse the entire working journey placed significant demands on the women. The ever-expectant social expectations inherent in the workplace were at odds with the sociality of the women. A 'double empathy problem' (Milton, 2012) existed for these women within the workplace, whereby the women and their colleagues seemed to have difficulty understanding each other's perspective. This led to challenges in communicating with both managers and co-workers. Environmental factors including the physical and sensory aspects posed as barriers, creating a disabling impact on their navigation of the world of work (Bölte, 2021). This fits within the perspective of the neurodiversity paradigm and social model of disability (Oliver, 1996), which contends that the environment can act as a barrier to participation and engagement and does not always effectively accommodate autistic women.

Within the working world, the women were actively engaged in employing a variety of management strategies to counteract their feelings of difference, in an attempt to 'fit in' and 'seem normal' and to protect themselves. These strategies were developed and employed in their childhood, some were schooled in how to be 'normal', while others learnt over the years to not draw attention themselves and proactively tried to present themselves differently to who they are and were, something they continued to do within the workplace, to conform to the workplace neurotypical expectations and nuances. The

high stakes nature of disclosure resulted in the women choosing not to disclose for fear of stigma and discrimination. The regulation of the information and presentation the women provided steered other perceptions of the self, whereby the women are developing an idealised public self-image that can be considered a form of impression management (Jorgenson et al., 2020; Schneid & Raz, 2020). The women appeared to be resistant to exposing their true selves because of past negative work experiences and perceived attitudes of others. The strategies employed can be seen as a defence mechanism, a survival skill to navigate a working world which was designed with neurotypicals in mind.

The work journeys of the women were complex and were influenced by histories of unemployment, underemployment, and instability, resulting in frequent job changes, intersecting to create further complexity. Some of the women identified how they struggled in establishing a work journey for themselves and often returning to education was an attempt to steer a work journey and was successful. While for others, they identified their ongoing concern establishing a work path for themselves. Navigating the neurotypical world came at a cost to the women and evident across most of their narratives was their experience of autistic burnout. As a result, the women tended to work part-time, were self-employed, took time off for recovery, utilised their annual leave and availed of other personal coping strategies, including sensory strategies. The women demonstrated resilience, determination, self-awareness, and self-sufficiency in managing work. However, there were consistent and definite additional pressures placed on the women, as well as a constant danger of burning out.

While the women did experience barriers in their work, the study findings also identified factors that enabled success. These included a good job-fit, supportive employment programmes, disclosure, and access to reasonable accommodations as well as family and collegiate support. Additionally, the women identified suggestions and advice for employers to incorporate into work structures and practices to further support and enable autistic women to thrive at work and to change the narrative from disabling to enabling.

Additionally, the perceptions of the women in their participation in the study demonstrated clearly that the narrative approach facilitated the voice of the autistic women and placed them at the forefront of the study, which was deemed important to them.

Across both findings' chapters there were common themes identified that support current research and contribute to new knowledge generation. The study's contribution to knowledge is discussed in detail in the sections that follow.

6.3 Autistic Graduate Women's Experiences of Navigating the World of Work: Discussion of Findings

Three central concepts have been identified across the findings, representing the experiences of navigating the world of work from the perspective of autistic graduate women:

- Working in a Neurotypical World - Factors Shaping Work Experiences
- Journeying through Work
- Navigating the Path to Success - Factors Shaping & Enabling Success at Work

6.3.1 Working in a Neurotypical World- Factors Shaping Work Experiences

Navigating the neurotypical working world is demanding as it presents significant barriers for autistic individuals as they seek to both obtain and maintain employment (Baldwin et al., 2014; Cooper & Kennady, 2021; Cope & Remington, 2022; Harmuth et al., 2018; Hendricks, 2010; Krieger et al., 2012; Pfeiffer et al., 2018; Remington et al., 2022). The pressures placed on the women accentuated the neurotypical processes in the modern world of work. Multifaceted factors such as pre-employment processes, relational demands with colleagues and double empathy problems, the unaccommodating sensory and physical work environments, together with the perceived sense of difference experienced by the women, as well as attitudes and concerns associated with disclosure

and autism, shaped the women's experience of work. In exploring these factors, the findings highlight how the neurotypical working world with its associated norms placed significant demands on the women and this influenced how the women navigated work.

6.3.1.1 Perception of Difference

Evident across all the women's narratives was their perceptions of both feeling and being different. This is the legacy of their past experiences, often originating in their childhood, which has stayed with them into their working lives. They have internalised perceptions of difference from societal views and negative self-perceptions in the general societal world and in a working world and this was evident in the words they used to describe themselves, often assigning themselves to negative stereotypes (Bargiela et al., 2016; Kanfischer et al., 2017; Leedham et al., 2020; Milner et al., 2019; Zener, 2019). They compared themselves to others, felt inadequate and not good enough. Bargiela et al., (2016) described this in relation to the autistic experience, however this current study identifies that it extends and traverses working lives.

Situated within a position of difference, and similar to what Leedham et al.'s (2020) study identified, the women have developed a view that they were intrinsically flawed after many attempts at trying to 'fit in' in a neurotypical world. They were critical of themselves and attributed some of their past problems to themselves. That is, problems within the work environment were internalised as 'them' being the problem or being 'not good enough'. An internalised ableism stemming from their belief of their difference, as well as believing workplace consequences were of their own making, influenced this and is evident in the literature (Buckley et al., 2021; Nagib & Wilton, 2021; Wood & Happe, 2023).

The women had a fear that they would be 'outed' for being different and for being autistic (Han et al., 2022). Stigma has been defined as negative judgements towards people that discredit a person's identity or traits and behaviours especially when these deviate from

an assumed 'norm' (Goffman, 1959). This stigmatisation can result in social shame, and when internalised through a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Becker, 1963, p.34) can lead to a form of internal oppression, resulting in low self-esteem and even self-degradation (Reeve, 2004). This current study highlights this theoretical position, the narratives identified how the women battled to manage their feelings of self-doubt and had trouble trusting in their own decisions. To some extent, the women appeared to have internalised ableist views (Campbell, 2009) leading to feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment (Han et al., 2022; Leedham et al., 2020), as they negotiated their working worlds.

For many this sense of difference was accentuated by a late diagnosis leading to confusion, uncertainty, and self-doubt. For some, the emotional toll of not knowing their autistic identity, led many of the women to lack confidence, and feel like an imposter within the workplace, evident in other studies relating to autistic women (Baldwin & Costley, 2016; Leedham et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2022). Albeit late and for many a very drawn-out process, the women's diagnosis and understanding of their autistic identity helped them to make sense of their perceived sense of difference, recognising how ableist norms and expectations (Campbell, 2009) had shaped their past and how negative past experiences shaped their sense of self and their personal identity (Kinavey, 2006). Most of the women identified that their diagnosis had been a positive experience as they finally understood themselves and had begun to develop a new identity (Haney & Cullen, 2018; Leedham et al., 2020). This led to a reconceptualisation of their past experiences and validated lifelong challenges as real, allowing them to be more compassionate to themselves and to revise their understandings of their experiences.

Many of the women were not diagnosed until their early and middle adulthood and their narratives highlighted a desire for a diagnosis and autistic identity earlier. Identity formation is centrally positioned during the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Erickson, 1968), however evident from the narratives is how this identity formation was delayed by the late diagnosis, most of the women had entered the workforce before learning of their autistic identity. They highlighted how this knowledge would have helped them to navigate

the working world and enhanced their quality of life. Although disclosure within the workplace was seen as complicated by the women in the study, which will be discussed later in this chapter, an earlier diagnosis potentially would have offered the women the opportunity to embrace their identity and the option of disclosure at earlier stages of their careers. These findings would suggest that identification of autism in women in earlier years is important. Given the fact that autism is generally associated with boys and men (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Kreiser & White, 2014; Mandy et al., 2012), this is problematic. Autistic women are a hidden group within society and struggle to obtain an autistic identity and diagnosis, as there is a significant lack of knowledge about autism in women. Intricacy here aligns with the complexity theory perspective (Tupe, 2014), which holds that no action occurs in isolation. A late diagnosis in women may be understood as the interconnection between poor societal and systemic understanding of autism in women and a political and historical context that highlights the male predominance in autism. This complex interaction places women and their access to autistic diagnosis on the periphery, further impacting on their overall wellbeing, their sense of identity, and opportunities for support in employment (Bargiela et al., 2016; Milner et al., 2019).

6.3.1.2 The Unaccommodating Social World of Work

The social aspects and expectations are pervasive across work structures and workplaces, and this places significant demands on autistic employees (Shattuck & Roux, 2014), and this was confirmed within the study. Universal across the women's stories was the complex interactions between autistic employees and non-autistic employees. The women identified how the social norms and practices, as well as the unwritten social rules were an integral component and a barrier of neurotypically designed workplaces. These social expectations and components traversed the entire employment process which impacted the women (Ezerins et al., 2023; McKnight-Lizotte, 2018) in both gaining and maintaining employment, as well as influencing their employment experiences.

Gaining employment requires one to identify a work opportunity, apply for positions and interview successfully. Half of all jobs in modern society are secured through social connections and networks (Markel & Elia, 2016), and having critical resources in the form of friendships and connections is reported to enhance the potential for career success and the transition to the workforce (McGhee Hassrick et al., 2020), often described as 'social capital' (Pesonen et al., 2022). Consistent with other studies (Orsmond et al., 2004, 2013; Pesonen et al., 2022), the women stressed how having smaller social connections and networks reduced social capital and their potential for sourcing job opportunities and securing employment (Kanfiszer et al., 2017; Lounds et al., 2017; Nagib & Wilton, 2020; Pesonen et al., 2022) and was again perceived as a barrier to access.

Additionally, the perceived expectation to reach out to employers in following up on job applications submitted was identified as a barrier. Some of the women described how they struggled with the neurotypical cultured expectation to repeatedly contact employers and demonstrate their motivation and enthusiasm at the application stage (Solomon, 2020). This challenge could be supported through mentorship from autistic peers and colleagues and highlights the potential need for autistic role models to support autistic women in taking the initial steps in identifying and applying for work positions.

Interviews are one of the most common ways of recruitment used by organisations (Levashina et al., 2014) and previous research has recognised that interviews are one of the greatest barriers for autistic individuals becoming employed (Anderson et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2015; Hendricks, 2010; McKnight-Lizotte, 2018; Muller et al., 2003; Scott et al., 2017; Whelpley et al., 2021) although more than capable of doing the job in question. Interviews are essentially a social test, whereby a person is required to talk about past experiences to demonstrate competencies and present oneself in the best light (Maras et al., 2021). The findings mirror other research which highlighted how negative emotions are associated with the interview process (McKnight-Lizotte, 2018; Nagib & Wilton, 2020; Siedler & Idczak-Paces, 2021). The women described how the overall interview experience was distressing, and recalled anxieties that it provoked for them personally as they

navigated the process. They not only identify this as an issue personally but acknowledge how they perceived that this interview process was a barrier for the autistic community generally.

Interviews involve highly intricate and complex social interactions, including rapport building and specific, but unspecified 'socially normative' expectations around communication with unfamiliar people (Anderson et al., 2021). The findings highlight how the social normative behaviours associated with neurotypical culture are perceived as required and expected by employers at interviews (Scott et al., 2017; Solomon, 2020) and this had a negative impact on the women. They clearly identified the perceived expectations placed on them, such as the need for facial expression and shaking hands did not often sit comfortably with them. Previous studies have highlighted how not engaging in these neurotypical 'normative' actions at interview stage can negatively impact on the outcome for autistic individuals (Sarrett, 2017; Vogeley et al., 2013). Additionally, the women described how they struggled to play the 'interview game', were literal in their responses, did not elaborate on answers and felt the need to be totally honest and not lie or over-elaborate. This finding is consistent with others (Davies et al., 2023; Lorenz et al., 2016; Strickland et al., 2013; Vogeley et al., 2013; Wehman et al., 2017), where being literal and failing to provide adequate context were identified as significant challenges in the recruitment interview process.

Many past employment support programmes have taken a medical model route (Shakespeare, 2013) to supporting autistic individuals to learn skills and provide advice to prepare for interviews. However, this deficit perspective, with the attempts to change the autistic person to fit with the neurotypical recruitment interview process is at odds with the neurodiversity perspective, failing to address the wider issues at play including which is the fact that employers and organisations need to adapt and change to support diversity within the workplace, rather than the onus always being on the individual person. In their recommendations to employers, the women perceived that interviews were biased against autistic individuals who engage in socially different ways. They proposed the need for

employers to change their processes rather than placing the onus on the autistic person to adapt, in line with the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990), with the prospect of enhanced opportunity to enter the workplace. Rather than altering the individual, the need is to work towards creating a more accepting interview environment for autistic people. These findings indicate the substantial need to explore an overhaul of the standardised, conventional job interview with its social norm expectations.

The neurotypical social 'norms' within the workplace were at odds with the unique social communication style of the women (Mitchell et al., 2021). In engaging in work, the women described their social interactions and social relationships with their colleagues and managers, which placed demands on them (Pfeiffer et al., 2017). They shared stories of interpersonal communication difficulties, such as struggling to process verbal communication, reading between the lines, and understanding nuances, and responding, reflecting the findings of other qualitative studies (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2004; Muller et al., 2003; McKnight-Lizotte, 2018). Sperry and Mesibov (2005) identified that social communication challenges with supervisors and other employees resulted in employment being ended prematurely and this reflects the experience of some of the women in this study, where they were misinterpreted by their neurotypical employers, where they perceived them unfavourably. Previous studies which explored social barriers for autistic individuals, have tended to come from a deficit perspective (McKnight-Lizotte, 2018), seeing the social communicative problems associated with the autistic individual themselves, while negating the other person within the interaction.

In moving the conceptualisation of autism away from the deficit perspective, and with the recent reconceptualisations of the difficulties experienced by autistic people in understanding others' thoughts and intentions, communication is emphasised as a two-way process and that misunderstandings reflect a 'double empathy problem' as described by Milton (2012 p. 883). This refers to the challenge between people of different dispositional outlooks and their personal conceptual understandings when attempts are made to communicate meaning. It is not a singular problem located in any one person but is ultimately based in the social interaction between two people. To frame the experiences

held by the women in this manner, begins to shift the responsibility away from the women towards the challenging social environmental barriers that are presenting within the workplace in their communication with neurotypical individuals, who seem to lack the capacity to empathise with autistic people and see them unfavourably (Mitchell et al., 2021). Locating the problem and solution solely within autistic women while disregarding environmental and social barriers is therefore incompatible with the neurodiversity perspective and absolves employers and employees of any responsibility to make adaptations or enhance their understandings, and this is not conducive to inclusion and equal participation (Mitchell et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2019; Shakespeare, 2013). Thus, successful participation and engagement within the social environment of the working world, must be more accommodating and requires more effective two-way communication. Perceptions and attitudes must change towards an alternative view of difference as positive diversity and acceptance within the workplace. An important finding of this study was how the women were challenged by the social expectations placed on them in work, which sees difference as a negative rather than a perspective of diversity. Misinterpretation of one's communication, as evidenced in this study, resulted in negative perceptions from others and made interactions even more difficult for the women (Howlin et al., 2005; Sperry & Mesibov, 2005), as they were fearful of engagement based on negative past social interactions, noting being reprimanded and criticised based on their social interactions. Heasman and Gillespie (2019) identify how greater flexibility in communication style is essential for successful collaboration between autistic employees and co-workers and this in turn may contribute to a more accommodating, inclusive, and accepting social milieu.

Disclosing an autistic identity has been suggested as one way to reduce miscommunication and misunderstandings to support and manage the social and communicative misunderstandings that occur within workplaces for autistic individuals (Sasson & Morrison, 2019). Sasson and Morrison (2019) identified that non-autistic person's first impressions of autistic people improved following disclosure and were further enhanced with additional knowledge and training in relation to autism acceptance. Employers who were more knowledgeable about autism showed an increased willingness to hire autistic

candidates (McMahon et al., 2020). Given that the women in this study tended not to disclose their autistic identity (discussed later in this discussion); research would suggest that this may have contributed to the social expectations and demands that they experienced. However, disclosure also places another additional demand on autistic women, increasing their burden of responsibility, rather than redirecting responsibility to others to accept diversity within the workplace, moving away from a neurotypicalised socialised culture, in line with the neurodiversity perspective (Kapp, 2020).

6.3.1.3 The Unaccommodating Sensory World of Work

Environmental factors as defined by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (World Health Organisation, 2019) include the physical and sensory environments in which people engage and participate, including work contexts, and these can act either as facilitators or barriers to engagement. The findings identified the significant disabling impact of the physical and sensory environments on the women's navigation of the world of work. Of note, they described how sensory aspects of the workplace such as the noise, smells, temperature, ventilation, and visual distractions including clutter and people, as well as artificial lighting and flickering lights created obstacles to their participation at work and were deemed to be overwhelming to the women's sensory systems. This was reflective of other studies, that had samples of both men and women, the majority men (Buckley et al., 2021; Gillot & Standen, 2007; Kirchner & Dziobek, 2014; Muller et al., 2003; Pfeiffer et al., 2017), indicating that the sensory environment can be a barrier and impact on work satisfaction and performance for both men and women.

The women also discussed how transport and travelling to and from their workplace, was also an invisible barrier that they had to negotiate. The sensory experiences of travelling to and from work, negotiating busy streets and managing public transport were sensorily overwhelming resulting in high levels of anxiety and stress. This has not been given much attention in the literature and is an important finding, illuminating how the broader

sensory environment impacts on the women's working roles and their overall experience of work and expands our understanding of the broader context of work.

Unaccommodating sensory environments require adaptation and change to support the work lives of these women. The women suggested the need for employers to create inclusive environments, by making small adaptations, that would benefit all. This perspective fits within a neurodiversity framework and social model of disability (Doyle, 2020; Kapp et al., 2013; Krcek, 2013; Oliver, 1983, 1996), whereby places of work should be assessed for adjustment and change rather than on focusing on the individual, the onus should not be on the person to adjust and change, but for the environment to be made as inclusive as possible. The concept of 'universal design principles' is a helpful approach in assisting the design of more inclusive workspaces (Milton et al., 2016). This approach nurtures diversity and can reduce barriers for the participation of autistic individuals (Martin et al., 2019). It can potentially address some of the sensory obstacles that the autistic women in this study experienced within the work environments and can support workers in a more inclusive manner in achieving their full potential. Additionally, employers must also consider the heterogeneous experiences of autistic individuals (Kargas et al., 2015) and consider additional tailored supports that can assist and support the autistic employee to engage in the sensory work environment.

6.3.1.4 High Stakes Disclosure and Attitudes

The decision to disclose their autistic identity within the workplace was identified as being complex by the women and in previous research (Romualdez et al., 2021). The process of disclosure was identified as a significant hurdle for the autistic women. From an Irish perspective, disclosure involves identifying ones 'medical diagnosis' or disability to the employer through a process of engagement with the employer or the relevant human resources representative. It is a process governed by legislation relating to equality in Irish law, in particular the Equal Status Act 2000-2012 (Department of Justice and Equality, 2013) and the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015 (Office of the Attorney General, 1998).

These Acts prohibit discrimination on the grounds of disability and require employers to take appropriate measures to enable a person who has a disability, to have access to employment and reasonable accommodations. These Acts are grounded in the rights-based approach and reflect the social model of disability where the emphasis is on the removal of barriers and the implementation of supports to enable equity (Oliver, 1990). To request accommodations, despite such legislation, requires disclosure. Not only is the onus to disclose on the individual, but they are required to build a disclosure narrative and to self-advocate. This process has been found to be a barrier, (Romualdez et al., 2021), the women in this study perceived both initiating this process and articulating their needs to be demanding. Employers, who actively encourage this practice of disclosure, however, may not be aware of the struggle this is for the women (Nicholas et al., 2019). Therefore, to improve the disclosure process the onus should be on organisational leaders to promote a more inclusive workplace culture where the process of disclosure is open and supportive.

Disclosing was seen as high stakes by the women. They discussed the risk assessments they underwent to support their decisions on whether to disclose, basing it on past experiences and their perceptions of their employers. Disclosing their autistic identity was not a onetime occurrence for the women, as many of the women switched work positions. Some of the women did disclose their disability in the past, but this shaped their future plans, both positively and negatively. Nevertheless, most of the women expressed a reluctance to reveal their autistic identity in the future, citing apprehensions about how employers and colleagues might perceive them. This aligns with findings from recent research, where the samples were male dominated (Buckley et al., 2021; Cooper & Kennady, 2021; Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Nagib & Wilton, 2021; Sarrett, 2017; Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2021; Wood & Happe, 2023). Some of the women described how they experienced bullying following past disclosures (Baldwin & Costley, 2016; Muller et al., 2003), discrimination and being limited in their work positions following disclosure (Romualdez et al., 2021). They perceived others to lack confidence in them, leaving them fearful of the impact of the attitudes of others in the future. Given that autism tends to hold a pathologised status in general society, theory identifies its association with the experience of stigma (Botha & Frost, 2020; Goffman, 1963). Autistic persons are often on the receiving end of negative stereotyping, and

discrimination (Gray, 2002), as they can be seen as constituting a socially devalued or stigmatized group (Botha & Frost, 2020). It could be said that the women in this study feared disclosing, as a result of this associated stigma and stereotypes and therefore to manage this high-stake act, they made the decision not to disclose (Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Sarrett, 2017). This can be constructed as social oppression with Botha and Frost (2020) highlighting the added stress burden and emotional labour in the form of minority stress experienced by autistic individuals.

These findings confirm and extend the current understandings of autism workplace disclosure, further identifying the perceived high stakes nature and concerns about stigma and discrimination. Even though the neurodiversity movement is evident within Irish society, these findings suggest that this has not resulted in sufficient improvements in autism understandings. While the women in this study cannot be considered as representative of the entire population of autistic women, a concern remains about a lack of awareness and acceptance, as well as negative attitudes towards autistic women within workplaces. Training and understanding of autistic people was deemed essential advice for employers by the women. The findings identify the need to not only work with autistic women in supporting them in developing a disclosure narrative identifying their strengths and areas requiring supports to enable them to succeed and thrive within the workplace. Moreover, there is a need to work with employers and employees to enhance their knowledge and understanding about neurodiversity and autism within the workplace by the provision of training, from autistic people, to enhance the benefits of personal contact in changing these attitudes (Sayce, 2011). Having views aligned with the neurodiversity perspective is associated with lower stigma toward autistic people (Gillespie et al., 2017) and therefore, has potential to improve public and professional understanding of autism, while also creating a culture where autistic people feel more able to express their true selves at work.

6.3.1.5 Navigating and Trying to Fit in in the Neurotypical Working World

Explicit throughout the narratives of the women is their attempts to fit in and navigate the neurotypical world of work. In doing so, the women identified various strategies that they employed as an adaptive response to manage and navigate the expectations of the neurotypical work environment, which has been maintained by a majority-group insistence on norms (Fletcher-Watson & Happe, 2019). The women described how these strategies; including masking, learning to socialise, monitoring, and pretending to be someone else, was a way to safeguard, protect and survive the neurotypically defined workplace norms and behaviours, to protect themselves and minimise the threat of negative social and employment outcomes. The women attempted to hide their autistic identity perceived as less acceptable, to not stand out or to pass as neurotypical. Much of the research on masking and strategies to fit in have focused on autistic women, where there is a belief that autistic women engage in masking and camouflaging more consistently and frequently compared to autistic males (Miller et al., 2021; Schneid & Raz, 2020; Seers & Hogg, 2023). Moreover, the literature on masking and camouflaging, has a more general focus, rather than within employment, but this study's findings align with these studies (Ai et al., 2022; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Chapman et al., 2022; Cridland et al., 2014; Driver & Chester, 2021; Hull et al., 2017; Leedham et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2021; Schneid & Raz, 2020; Seers & Hogg, 2023; Tint & Weiss, 2018), and extends our understanding on how employing strategies to fit in continues within the context of the working world. Unpacking the descriptions of these strategies and approaches used by the women to fit in sheds light on their personal experiences and on the complex navigation that they face to align with norms and expectations.

The continuous management strategies undertaken by the women can be aligned with the work of Goffman (1956) and his dramaturgical analogy to describe the regulation of information and the variety of strategies person's use to steer and influence other individuals' perceptions of the 'self', to foster and create a more idealised public self-image within an interaction. This is an approach whereby the person (conceptualised by Goffman as the actor) performs in a way that conforms to predefined social and moral expectations

and shared worldviews (Goffman, 1959). In this way, the presence of characteristics, both visible and invisible, if brought to the forefront by either the performer or the audience, can impact on how the performance is viewed or received. The women were acutely aware that their 'differences' and their failed attempts at fitting in within the workplace exposed them, and they resisted showing their true selves in favour of presenting a more accepted neurotypical behaviour, because they perceived that society and social norms expected them to act in certain way (Driver & Chester, 2021; Hull et al., 2017). This relationship described by the women could be viewed through Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), whereby the women are attempting to avoid the perceived stigma associated with the autistic identity and wish to conceal themselves by adopting multiple strategies to align with neurotypical behaviours. While the women are actively engaged in managing themselves and their identity in this manner, albeit for valid reasons, this reinforces a societal view of negative difference (Miller et al., 2021).

Policing of femininity starts at a young age, where there are gendered norms and expectations placed on girls and women, and this tends to act as a strong motivator to maintain the appearance of 'normal' (Gemma, 2021; Simone, 2010). Autistic women are said to develop masking and camouflaging strategies early (Cridland et al., 2014; Kanfischer et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016). Application from these previous studies would suggest that the women in this study developed strategies to hide and conceal themselves at a young age, to make themselves less 'different'. In addition, many of the women referred to how they pretended to be someone else at work, not their authentic self and did this by taking on a different persona, concealing and hiding their intelligence, as well as monitoring and suppressing their own thoughts and perspectives, managing, and limiting their stimming, as well as choosing not to disclose. These have all been identified as impression management strategies within the literature (Ai et al., 2022; Botha et al., 2022; Gemma, 2021; Hull et al., 2017). This current study's findings support the wider literature on masking by autistic women (Bargiela et al., 2016; Hull et al., 2017; Leedham et al., 2020). The detail of masking and strategies within the work context presented in this study develop our understanding of the extent to which masking, and impression management

strategies pervade the women's working lives (Schneid & Raz, 2020) and add to the body of knowledge on this topic in the literature.

The adoption of such strategies shaped these autistic women's experiences of the workplace, underscore its neurotypical compatibility, and they reinforce the additional and unfair efforts autistic women feel required to make in order to fit in at work. Having to apply strategies placed a substantial burden on these autistic women. These women should not be expected to adapt and change who they are to succeed and navigate work, however it was perceived necessary by all the women. They described their motivations to engage in these strategies seeing it as a defence mechanism and to protect their vulnerabilities, a survival technique. Pearson and Rose (2021) suggested that employing strategies such as masking identified by the women could be seen as a trauma response that develops from experiences of stigma. This was reflected to some degree within the narratives of the women; by employing strategies the autistic women were defending themselves from the neurotypical perspective. Even though employing strategies to fit in at work was necessary from their perspective and was seen as functionally adaptive to support them in work, the findings also highlighted how employing these strategies was associated with negative connotations and consequences for some of the women, given that the women felt that they could never truly show their authentic self, which gave rise to some of the women feeling like they didn't belong which in turn could be seen to impact on their overall mental health. This could align with Mitchell et al.,'s (2021) transactional model and proposed link between autistic individuals being misperceived by the neurotypical majority and therefore being at a greater risk of poor mental health and wellbeing, as well as experiencing concerns around belonging.

While the findings of this study are consistent with other research (Hull et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2021), this study is the first to elicit autistic graduate women's subjective experiences of employing multiple strategies in the context of work to fit in and reveals greater insights into the nuances into the complex relationship between work, fitting in and masking. Current practices within employment focuses on 'normalising' autistic individuals, trying to

make them function more like neurotypical people, and this was emphasised by the women in this study (Milton, 2016). These critical findings highlight the need for workplaces to create an inclusive working culture in which employees feel that they can bring their whole selves to work and to be authentic and express their true selves, should they wish to. In attempting to change the neurotypicalities of work, employers must create a culture of diversity, where strengths and differences are accepted and encouraged. Employers would benefit not only from neurodiversity training, but also to make significant changes by adapting policies and mission statements that acknowledge and value diversity, as well as highlighting the value of identity and authenticity within the workplace.

6.3.1.6 Working in a Neurotypical World- Factors Shaping Work Experiences

The findings show that the world of work is at odds with the neurodiversity perspective (Kapp, 2020) and is more aligned with neurotypicality. Work and its associated systems are designed for neurotypical individuals and despite how society is moving towards a more neurodiverse perspective and stance, this was not evident in many of the work experiences described by the women, which indicated interconnected factors that shaped their work experiences.

6.3.2 Journeying through Work

Work journeys are no longer defined by a linear process (Savickas, 2002; Scully-Russ & Toracco, 2020; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), however, even within this profile, evident across the women's narratives was a distinct sense of complexity, and fragmentation which defined their journeys. The women's work journeys were characterised by unemployment, underemployment, and instability, as well as challenges in crafting and shaping a work path. Furthermore, across their journeys was evidence of autistic burnout, which added further complication to experiences. There was high levels of mobility and change for the women with multifaceted influences on their work paths. The women accentuated their work journeys as patchwork and chequered. This is a prevalent finding given that there is scant research in the general autism literature on autistic employee's work journeys and

trajectories (Ezerins et al., 2023; Raymaker et al., 2023) and even more so for autistic individuals who have completed higher education (Vincent, 2020) and nothing specific to autistic graduate women. Most of the literature to date has tended to have a short-term view of work and employment focusing on a particular work experience (Nicholas & Klag, 2020), rather than the work experience across time for autistic individuals.

6.3.2.1 Histories of Unemployment, Underemployment, and Instability

Despite the high employment rate of the women at the time of the study, their narratives highlight the prominence of underemployment, unemployment, and work instability in their work histories. Underemployment was experienced by many of the women where their experience, knowledge, and abilities were not aligned with their working positions and status (Baldwin et al., 2014; Duffy, 2009). This indicates a clear disjunction in their educational attainment and employment status, a concept present in the literature (Baldwin & Costley, 2016; Baldwin et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2015; Frank et al., 2018; Hedley et al., 2018; Hayward et al., 2018b; Muller et al., 2003; Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2004). Many of the women were underchallenged and experienced boredom in either their current job or past positions (Milner et al., 2017). They expressed dissatisfaction similar to that reported by Milner and colleagues (2015, 2014) and were frustrated that their educational attainment was not matching their work position, with many of the women in low-paid jobs, despite the fact that their educational credentials would suggest more favourable outcomes, such as higher salaries and higher work status positions (Migliore et al., 2012; Ohl et al., 2017; Rast et al., 2020). The women felt underutilised and under challenged (Gmelch & Chan, 1994; Leider & Buchholz, 1995; Wylie, 2004). Wylie (2004) defined this as 'rust out'. Rust out has been described as work, which is uninspiring and fails to stretch the person, so that they become disinterested, apathetic, and indifferent (Wylie, 2004). This was evident for some of the women and resulted in some making conscious decisions to quit their jobs, given that it was associated with the development of negative wellbeing (Barnay, 2016).

Unemployment also featured, often because the women left their underemployed positions, but also due to difficulties in securing and maintaining employment. For some, unemployment was transient in nature across their journeys, while for others, their work journeys were defined by long-term unemployment. This is reflective of the high levels of unemployment evident across the autistic community (Baldwin et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2015; Dudley et al., 2015; Hendricks, 2010; Muller et al., 2003; Roux et al., 2013; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011; Scott et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2012). This is even more distinct for autistic women, with research indicating that autistic women often experience higher levels of unemployment compared to autistic men (Joshi et al., 2015; United Nations, 2007).

Finding a job was described as challenging by some of the women. Employment opportunities and career advancement are generally dependant on previous vocational success (DeVos et al., 2021). Similar to Muller et al., (2003), the women were concerned that employers would look unfavourably on their fragmented histories, awash with unemployment as well as their shorter working experiences accentuated by the women leaving their jobs because of underemployment. Some of the women were generally only successful in securing short term employment opportunities and the precarity of this type of contract had consequences (Formby, 2017) and further complicated the women's work journeys. This was identified in a study of autistic staff working in higher education, who identified unstable employment and limited opportunities and the challenges of this (Milton et al., 2019). For the women in this study the sense of instability instilled further apprehension, intensifying their concerns, and creating a sense of despondency for their future. Cycles of short-term employment together with histories of underemployment and unemployment created intersected and deepened the women's concern around their prospects for their future work journey. Some of the women described the impact that these experiences had on their sense of identity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, placing these women at serious risk for challenges with their mental, emotional, and physical health and wellbeing (Barnay, 2016; Blustein, 2008; Blustein et al., 2013; Bruyere et al., 2012; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009; Remington & Pellicano, 2019). Additionally, these histories came at a financial cost to these women (Schofield et al., 2011), and further highlighted the impact of these histories on the women.

These findings align with and extend the work of Vincent (2020) who explored the transition from higher education to employment for autistic university students and recent graduates in the United Kingdom. The students and graduates in Vincent's study, the majority men (15 identified as male and 6 identified as female), experienced similar challenges to the women in this current study and indicated a particular 'unevenness' of work experiences also described by Sheller (2015, p.15), culminating in disappointing employment outcomes. The findings of Vincent's study (2020) and this current research study are in concurrence with the wider narrative around autistic graduates (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, 2019) and autistic adults more generally in the United Kingdom (Roux et al. 2013) who experience histories of unemployment and underemployment. Evidence in this study suggests uneven patterns of work, impacts on these autistic women in relation to future employment prospects, their financial status and their overall health and wellbeing.

6.3.2.2 Creating a Work Journey

Attending higher education offers the opportunity to enhance employment outcomes (Cheriyen et al., 2021; Goldfarb et al., 2023; Ohl et al., 2017) and this was the rationale for many of the women attending higher education initially. What was distinct across many of the women's work journeys was a return to education at various points along this journey and on some occasions, more than once. For some of the women, their motivation to return to education was a desire to change career direction and to embark on something new that interested them. Often because their past work experiences were not aligned with their interests, they had a desire to try and make changes for themselves to foster a new work journey. This highlights how some of the women were attempting to create an enhanced job-fit for themselves as described in the literature (Buckley et al., 2021; Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014). This can be seen as a positive mechanism for sustaining employment (Goldfarb et al., 2019; Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020). For others, returning to education was the women's desire to further their education and progress within their current working roles, with a need to upskill. The return to education was not only a goal for progression in their working roles, but more importantly, was for them, a way to push themselves

personally. They attributed the need to push themselves with a fear of stagnation, to counteract their feelings of difference and inadequacy and to be positioned equally within the workplace. This could be seen as an impression management strategy employed by the women to fit in at work (Jorgenson et al., 2020; Schneid & Raz, 2020). For others, returning to education was a 'safety-net', a way of circumnavigating the world of work, as it was associated with significant concerns and fears. For these women education was a place of protection and shelter, where their strengths could be harnessed (Chown et al., 2018). In more recent times, the availability, and opportunity for prolonged and further education has supported delayed entry to the job market (Salmela-Aro, 2013) and within this study, this was evident for some of the women, often resulting in the women engaged in education for longer periods than in employment.

Despite education playing an important part in the women's work lives, it didn't necessarily identify a defined work trajectory that they were interested in following. Some of the women shared how they were directionless in crafting a work journey. This concept has been described by others (De Vos et al., 2019; Suarez-Bilbao et al., 2023) and the process of implementing career decision-making has been described as complex (Amir & Gati, 2006). The women struggled to clarify their values, identify, and evaluate career opportunities, establish a plan, and operationalise this plan and its associated actions and steps (De Vos et al., 2019). The women clearly indicated that this process was intricate and difficult for them without support and guidance, and this did seem to limit them in their employment participation. Sometimes changes in their work, or their return to education, was based on spontaneity with little conscious decision making employed and for many this accounted for the complexity in their work journeys. Understanding of the processes and complexities of work journeys has been given little attention in the literature, with scant research on autistic employees work journeys and trajectories across the lifespan (Ezerins et al., 2023; Raymaker et al., 2023).

What the women did do was identify the crucial need for assistance and support in setting work and career goals, in navigating these journeys and in identifying how they can succeed

in achieving these actions, aligning with the findings from Nagib and Wilton (2020), who also highlighted how autistic online forum members struggled in developing a work journey. These findings indicate a need for the development of individualised transition support for autistic women post university and throughout their working journeys to support them in identifying their work goals and offering assistance in achieving these. Pesonen et al., (2021) indicated that supports post university are inadequate for autistic individuals generally. This is a crucial area that needs to be addressed and an implication for higher education institutes, given that employment is a basic human right (United Nations General Assembly, 2007). Exemplary examples of these individualised supports from an Irish context include the Trinity College Dublin transition to employment support service; Career Pathways which could be mainstreamed across all universities and higher education institutes to support autistic individuals in their transition to the workplace (Lewis et al., 2016) and offering access to employment. Furthermore, autistic women would benefit from access to support from career counsellors and mentors in supporting them to identify their work interests and desires and to support them in capitalising on their knowledge, qualifications, competencies, and skills to craft a work journey and obtain an optimal person-career fit (Tims & Akkermans, 2020).

6.3.2.3 Autistic Burnout and its Consequences

Navigation of the neurotypical world of work with its associated structures and environments, attitudinal barriers and perceptions of autism necessitated the employment of management strategies by the women within the work context and this placed a considerable additional burden on the women with personal consequences for them. The nature of employing strategies to hide oneself and suppress aspects of one's identity, means having to view oneself through the lens of another (Pearson & Rose, 2021). Du Bois (1897) wrote of this 'double consciousness' of being Black in America and explained the difficulty reconciling two aspects of oneself, a concept which relates to the theory of cognitive dissonance. This implies two competing ideals held by an individual, which potentially causes stress, where the person is walking within two different worlds to survive (Pearson & Rose, 2021). This resonates with the experiences of the women; in

employing strategies. Taking on different personas resulted in the women experiencing exhaustion and high levels of stress across their work journey (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2017). They were able to maintain the energy draining nature of utilising these strategies in the short term, but it took its toll on them in the long term, leading them to feel overwhelmed and exhausted.

Navigating the complexity of these uniquely interconnecting factors evident from their experiences and stories had negative consequences for their sustained employment, their work journeys, and their overall well-being. Ultimately, working in a predominately non-autistic and unaccommodating working world, came at a cost for these women. Across their narratives, their experiences clearly indicated descriptions of their physical, and emotional exhaustion, significant mental health difficulties, and more prevalent experiences of autistic burnout (Higgins et al., 2021; Mantzalas et al., 2021; Mantzalas et al., 2022). 'Autistic burnout' is a term often used by autistic adults to describe a state of chronic exhaustion, loss of skills, distress, and reduced tolerance to stimulus in every area of daily living (Raymaker et al., 2020). This term was frequently used by many of the women to describe the consequence and impact of trying to manage and journey through work and is growing in recognition within the literature (Mantzalas et al., 2022a; Higgins et al., 2021; Raymaker et al., 2020). Kieran Rose, the Autistic Advocate, explained how *'burnout is an integral part of the life of an Autistic person... Yet nobody, apart from Autistic people, seem to know about it'* (Rose, 2018, no pagination). This current study sheds light on this phenomenon. The women described how the cumulative load of being at work, managing its demands, suppressing their real selves, and negotiating and navigating double empathy problems, as well as the barriers that existed in the sensory environment of work contributed to their experience of autistic burnout. While these findings do resonate with the work of Raymaker et al.'s (2020) study, which identified cumulative loads leading to burnout, this study highlights how autistic burnout was experienced by the women in the context of work but affecting all aspects of their lives.

Autistic burnout does align with the literature on occupational burnout which describes a response to chronic stress in an employment situation, including feeling exhausted, detachment from the job, and a sense of failure (Maslach, 1998), resulting in reduced functioning. The conceptual model of risk and protective factors for autistic burnout put forward by Mantzalas, Richdale and Dissanayake (2022), titled: 'Conceptual Model of Autistic Burnout' based on the social-relational model of disability (Thomas, 2004) and the neurodiversity framework (Kapp, 2020) resonates with the factors that resulted in the women experiencing burnout. The Conceptual Model of Autistic Burnout offers a holistic perspective for understanding individual, social, and environmental factors that can influence autistic burnout and provides a foundation for which this study could apply its findings to define autistic burnout within the context of work. In doing so, direct, and indirect, interconnected relationships between the personal demands placed on the individual at work, the environmental demands of the workplace and personal and environmental resources, strategies, accommodations, and support, can interlink to impact and influence how this was experienced by the women. These findings shed light on the nuanced experiences of burnout by the descriptive accounts shared by the women. The scant research in existence identifies the need to further our understanding of the experience of autistic burnout given that relatively little is known about this experience (Higgins et al., 2021; Mantzalas et al., 2022; Raymaker et al., 2020).

The shared characteristics of autistic burnout which included exhaustion characterised by diminished and depleted energy levels, as well as experiences of shutdown and poor mental health with a significant loss of wide-ranging skills, meltdowns and emotional outbursts typified the women's experiences, consistent with recent literature (Higgins et al., 2021; Mantzalas et al., 2021a). The women explained how autistic burnout appeared to be both a short- and long-term experience for them, which contradicts the definition of autistic burnout described by Raymaker et al., (2020), which characterises burnout as the experience of exhaustion for a period of three months or more. Some of the women in this study did not place time specific constraints on their experiences explicitly, however, they did describe how they saw burnout as being both short and long term in nature and transcended across the lifespan and their work journeys, with some of the women

experiencing autistic burnout on multiple occasions. These findings support the need to adopt a developmental approach in future research exploring autistic burnout across a person's life and in particular within the context of work.

These findings and the findings of other studies (Mantzas et al., 2022; Raymaker et al., 2020) have identified the substantial impact of autistic burnout on the lives of autistic individuals and in this research context; autistic graduate women. Despite, these potentially negative findings, this was the true experience held by the women and was a consequence of the unaccommodating working world, further implicating the complexity experienced across their work journey. They described the impact it had on their professional roles and in their journeys through work across time, for some they were required to leave their work positions, work reduced hours, take periods of short- and long-term leave, as well as taking time out of their personal lives to rest, recover and recoup their energy. The impact was severe. In aligning these autistic burnout experiences with complexity theory, to truly understand this phenomenon it is necessary to identify and consider the complexity and interconnectedness of individuals, and context, the social pressures, and structural and political arrangements (Tupe, 2014). This lens is useful in refining our understandings of the impact of social structures, and cultural institutions and how they impact on participation within the world of work and challenges linear models of understanding (Aldrich, 2008).

Despite the serious and negative repercussions of autistic burnout on the women's working lives, this study also found that the women were incredibly resilient and developed solutions and coping strategies to manage some of the characteristics and their experiences of burnout, as well as identifying facilitators to support them in maintaining work across their journeys. The ability to recognise the early signs of potential autistic burnout is vital for self-management and past experiences of burnout can improve a person's ability to recognise triggers and to develop and implement strategies for management (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2023; Higgins et al., 2021; Mantzas et al., 2022b). Some of the women stressed the importance of taking breaks from work by

availing of annual leave or accrued flexitime. Taking these breaks enabled the women to refill their energy stores, which allowed them to deal with the stressors that the work imposed on them and this has been described (Ghanouni & Quirke, 2022; Higgins et al., 2021; Raymaker et al., 2020). Furthermore, some of the women highlighted how in managing their day-to-day work, they employed simple sensory strategies, took short breaks in the outdoors, and stayed overnight if they were travelling for work. These approaches demonstrate the resilience and determination of these women to navigate the unaccommodating neurotypical design of the working world.

To my knowledge, this is the first study that has provided understanding of autistic burnout from the perspective of autistic graduate women and from the context of work. Notably, autistic burnout appears to be a phenomenon that substantially impacts on autistic graduate women's working lives and needs greater attention for future research and understandings. It is important that there is greater understanding of this phenomenon across both the autistic community and the professional community to validate their experiences and offer support and strategies. Additionally, the employment of strategies, such as masking, pretending to be someone else, or suppressing oneself in employment can come with significant consequence, thus a more neurodiverse perspective on a macro-level is needed with enhanced understandings of autism, to reduce discrimination and stigma related to autism, potentially reducing the risk of autistic burnout for autistic graduate women which will influence and support them in journeying through work.

Furthermore, there is limited and weak evidence of the association between employment/unemployment and mental health and quality of life for autistic individuals (Garcia-Villamizar et al., 2002; Lin & Huang, 2019). No study thus far has indicated how workplace experiences impact on health and wellbeing (Davies et al., 2023) and evident across this research was how the women experienced autistic burnout across their working journeys, as a result of the dominating neurotypical world of work which placed significant pressures on the women to manage and adapt their behaviours more in line with

neurotypicality, thus impacting not only their mental health but also on their working lives and working status.

6.3.2.4 Summary of Journeying through Work

The narratives of the women demonstrated complexity across their work journeys influenced by high levels of job switching, returning to education, changing careers and histories of unemployment, underemployment, and burnout.

These findings are significant given the increasing number of autistic young people entering the higher education system around the world (Adolfsson & Simmeborn Fleischer 2015; Gardiner & Iarocci, 2013; Hamilton et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2018) and the wider evidence that suggests underemployment and unemployment for this population (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, 2019; Lorenz et al. 2016; Roux et al. 2013; Scott et al. 2017), as features of work journeys. Based on these findings, we now have an enhanced understanding of the journey experienced by autistic graduate women and we need to consider how we can support these autistic women in not only finding and maintaining employment, but more importantly how we can support these educated women to find a work journey where they can experience success.

6.3.3 Navigating the Path to Success – Factors Shaping & Enabling Success at Work

The women shared the significant barriers that they had to navigate within the world of work and across their work journeys, however the findings also identified factors that benefited and enabled some of the women to successfully engage at work. Work was identified as being important, as it resulted in significant implications such as financial independence, a sense of purpose and identity, as well as offering for some a sense of fulfilment and achievement, consistent with other literature (Chen et al., 2015; Garcia-Villamizar et al., 2002; Hedley et al., 2018; Hendricks, 2010; Solomon, 2020). The women

attributed their success to; a good job fit, flexible work arrangements, support from employment organisations and accommodating workplaces.

6.3.3.1 Good Fit

A good job fit is considered essential in the maintenance of employment (Dreaver et al., 2020). Consistent with previous research, the women reported that they were successful at work when their job matched with their interests, strengths, and abilities (Hayward et al., 2019; Hendricks, 2010; Lorenz & Heinitz 2014). Strengths and interests can be an advantage in the working world for autistic people and can offer a good person-job-fit (Buckley et al., 2021; Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014). The women were keen to describe how their strengths and passions supported them in their working role. They explained how their unique ability to drive and tunnel their passions into their work, as well as their observation, organisational, and problem-solving skills, and creativeness was advantageous to employers. These specific traits and abilities identified by the women mirror the reported skills held by autistic people seen as valuable in the workplace (de Schipper et al., 2016; Krzeminska et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2019). This has been described as 'autistic advantage' (Russell et al., 2019) and can support and enable a better job-fit. Focusing on strengths was rated as the most crucial factor in facilitating employment for autistic employees in a survey of autistic adults, employers, and service providers (Black et al., 2020). This strengths-based perspective assumes that people achieve more from making the most of their talents, rather than in identifying areas of growth, reinforcing the need for employers to enable autistic strengths rather than placing the burden on autistic employees to adapt and change. The strengths-based approach is encouraging, but it does have its limitations, given that autistic women are a heterogeneous group and experience individual differences (Bury et al., 2020; Kargas et al., 2015; López et al., 2008; Loth et al., 2021; Praslova, 2021a, 2021b). Given this variability, the women stressed the need for employers to have open and honest communication with autistic women. They advocated for the need for more individualised approaches to supporting these strengths at work (Dreaver et al., 2020), in line with the person-environment fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), and to consider individual differences and support needs, to enable and support the

matching of jobs that align with strengths, interests and abilities (Bury et al., 2020). In line with the neurodiversity perspective (Kapp, 2020) and the need for a diversity of minds within the workplace, the women further identified how employers would benefit from employing neurodivergent people and that embracing a neurodiverse workforce can be a formula for success (Annabi & Locke, 2019; Cope & Remington, 2022; Remington & Pellicano, 2019).

Self-employment was also perceived to be a factor in enabling a good job-fit for three of the women. It offered the women an alternative pathway in the working world, and for some it allowed them to develop and thrive in areas of their own passions and interests (Ashley & Graf, 2018). Literature highlights how self-employment is becoming a popular choice of career for individuals with disabilities (Ashley & Graf, 2018; Palmer et al., 2000). The women identified how it offered flexibility, with options to choose one's own hours and to adapt work schedules to meet other demands (Griffin et al., 2014), for example for one woman, she identified how it enabled her to balance her work and mothering role (Hatfield, 2015).

While previous literature has identified that self-employment is seen as an option for less educated women, this was not the case in this study as all the women were highly educated (Budig, 2006; Carr, 1996; Dawson et al., 2009). For the women, self-employment provided viable options toward overcoming employment disparities and barriers (Yamamoto & Alverson, 2017). It supported them in avoiding the typical job application and interview procedure, deemed as a difficulty process and allowed the women to create a sensory and safe environment, that they could adapt to meet their needs. The area of self-employment has received little examination within the autism and work literature to date and these findings provide some preliminary evidence for how members of the autistic community may be engaging in self-employment as a means to gain and maintain work and enable a good job-fit. Although these findings cannot be generalised to all autistic women, they do indicate that self-employment may have benefits and the establishment of programmes

and supports could assist autistic women to pursue this path, should they so wish (Ashley & Graf, 2018).

Part-time working practices also contributed to some of the women's success at maintaining work. Part-time work patterns have become increasingly commonplace within contemporary working structures and systems (Lorquet et al., 2018). Long working hours have been associated with reduced work-life balance and general feelings of dissatisfaction (Fagan et al., 2012). Four of the women opted for shorter working hours, with some of these having previously worked fulltime. Choosing to work part-time was seen for some of these women as a necessity to manage their health and wellbeing, as previous experience of fulltime employment had led to autistic burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020). Hayward et al.'s (2018a) study identified that autistic women were less likely to choose full-time employment, they considered this as a negative employment outcome. The findings of this study contradict Hayward et al.'s (2018a) perspective, whereby working part-time was seen as essential for the women enabling them to remain and be active and engaged within the labour market. In comparing the experience and preference of part-time work across men and women, Baldwin, and Costley (2016), indicated that unemployed men are less likely to work part-time compared to women, and evident from the women in this current study, part-time was a desire and preference for some of the women.

While working part-time can lower income, two of the women substantiated their wages with financial support from the state (the Disability Allowance). This combination provided financial stability for the women and also ensured that they maintained their governmental supports such as their medical card protecting their future should they experience ill-health or unemployment. These findings support the notion that a universal social income could facilitate some autistic women to participate at their preferred level within the labour market, while also being more financially stable and identify how shorter working arrangements such as part-time work can enhance employment opportunities for autistic women.

6.3.3.2 Support from Employment Organisations and Programmes

Disability employment programmes, which were customisable, and which combined the joint needs of employers and employees were endorsed by some of the women. They identified how these supports were helpful for securing and maintaining successful employment. These employment programmes were based on the women disclosing their autistic identity to secure employment within organisations that supported autistic individuals. Thus, being diagnosed acted as a turning point, enabling them to gain employment. Although the negative impact of pathologising one's identity as autistic has been pointed out (Milton & Sims, 2016), it was considered helpful here. Disclosing as autistic offered opportunities to avail of customisable and tailored reasonable accommodations within the workplace. This context is consistent with previous findings which also found that autistic people chose to disclose to avail of accommodations (Romualdez et al., 2020; Romualdez et al., 2021).

Employment programmes tended to act as a support in the context of maintaining a worker role. Mentoring and the availability of a support person from these organisations was considered helpful throughout work experiences, providing individualised short- and long-term support (Markel & Elia, 2016). The women reported how they benefited from meeting with their mentor or support person and often availed of their services when they needed to negotiate further accommodations within the workplace. Research studies on employment support programs often focus solely on working with a person to secure a job rather than on maintaining employment (Nicholas & Klag, 2020; Nicholas et al., 2017; Sharpe et al., 2022). This study, however, illustrated that the women benefited from the ongoing support in maintaining their work (Buckley et al., 2022; Burgess & Cimera 2014). Some of the women also identified the positive qualities of some employers and colleagues who were aware of the women's autistic identity and described how they further supported them in their working roles and demonstrated understanding and acceptance. This was particularly visible in one women's accounts of her interactions with her line manager. Evident in her descriptions was the good and clear communication pathway, that played a large part in supporting the woman in her work (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2023)

and bridged the double empathy divide (Milton, 2012), where efforts were made to support and account for their different communication styles (Milton, 2012), such as adapting how instructions were communicated.

6.3.3.3 Summary of Navigating the Path to Success – Factors Shaping & Enabling Success at Work

The importance of facilitators for securing and maintaining successful employment has received some attention within the body of research (Dreaver et al., 2020; Harmuth et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2019), but this has not focused on autistic women solely. This study has indicated how a good fit between the person, and their strengths, abilities, interests, and knowledge can support successful employment for autistic graduate women. Furthermore, self-employment and part-time work benefited these women in participating in the labour market and the findings provided evidence for how flexible and contemporaneous approaches (Nalis et al., 2021; Sullivan & Ariss, 2021) can support the women to navigate work with success.

Tailored employment support programmes also benefited these women to experience positive work outcomes, although the evidence remains associated with employment programmes remains weak (Hedley et al., 2017; Wehman et al., 2017), this study highlights how employment programmes may be of benefit to autistic graduate women. Although these types of programmes are unlikely to provide a universal solution, they are a potential avenue for autistic women who wish to seek employment in this manner.

6.3.4 Summary of Autistic Graduate Women’s Experiences of Navigating the World of Work

The principal findings from this research have been discussed and contend that the world of work for autistic graduate women is at odds with the neurodiversity perspective. Work and its associated systems are designed for neurotypical individuals in mind and despite how society is moving towards a more neurodiverse stance, this is not evident across the

narratives of the women. The nuanced understanding of the women's work journeys and work experiences highlight the complexity experienced by the women as they navigated the neurotypical world of work. The systemic barriers made it more difficult for these autistic women to secure and maintain their working positions.

A radical overhaul of the autism discourse and portrayal amongst employers, and broader society is required. Moreover, there is a need to stop propagating the deficit model where ablest views about autism have been upheld within workplaces and adopt the account from within the experience of autistic women based on the neurodiversity perspective and the social model of disability. It is imperative to aim for a more inclusive society, where human diversity; people with different qualities and abilities are celebrated. A change in narrative that supports autistic women as valued employees, within an inclusive and diverse workplace providing individualised supports is required to enable full participation and engagement to thrive and be successful.

The next section will discuss the findings from Study Three and the contribution to knowledge arising from these findings will be outlined.

6.4 Women's Perceptions of Participating in the Study: Discussion of Findings

Autistic adults have fought to be included in research making the case that the disability rights motto '*nothing about us without us*' applies just as much to research as it does to any other realm in society (Milton & Bracher, 2013; Robertson, 2010). Against this backdrop, I sought to seek the perspectives of the women in participating in this narrative research study. A neurodiversity framework guided this overall research study and from this perspective, aimed to centralise the voice of autistic graduate women as experts of their lived experiences of work (Milton, 2014; Milton & Bracher, 2013). Furthermore, considering empowerment from the neurodiversity perspective, the research aimed to authorise the women to share their perspectives on the research process, perceived as a

matter of moral principle and inclusion. In doing so, I aimed to inform other researchers and contribute to current literature on the use of methodological approaches in research, which can potentially feed forward into the socio-political autism agenda for change in society and in how research is conducted with autistic participants into the future.

Evident in their perspectives, was the view that autistic women were a hidden group within current and past research (Saxe, 2017) and within general society and understanding of autism. They expressed the motivation to be involved to advocate for the autistic community in contributing to research and in addressing the significant gap in knowledge about autistic women, which aligns with current research and the multiple international calls for increased research on issues impacting autistic women (Howlin & Magiati, 2017; Piven & Rabins, 2011; Warner et al., 2019). A key component of their endeavors was to improve the lives of autistic people and their allies by engaging in this research. They identified the value of the study to the wider Irish autistic community and affirmed that the topic of employment was an area that warranted further examination, mirroring the wider international call (Davies et al., 2023; Nicholas & Klag, 2020). Evident from their views was the need for research translation ensuring that research has a real-world effect (Kirby et al., 2021). Furthermore, they perceived that positive representation of autistic women, describing the barriers, influencers, and challenges of work, would support autistic women from a peer perspective and could combat the direct and indirect personal concerns that may arise for autistic women in relation to their navigation of work.

The narrative inquiry approach taken within this research focused on the lived experiences of the women (Kramp, 2004) and supported their meaning making through the process of the women telling their personal work story (Bonsall, 2012). This approach and the framework of using the single narrative open question at the outset of the first interview, was deemed by the women to offer them flexibility and an opportunity to share and shape their story in whatever way they so wished (Wengraf, 2001), enabling them the freedom for free narration and improvisation. This offered the women a sense of agency and control and a powerful medium in which to share their stories.

The women identified that the structure of a second interview which built on the first was welcomed and allowed them to develop their story on a deeper level. This was identified as important to them. They also reported the strong presence of the strength's-based and context-based approach employed in exploring the women's lives from the neurodiversity perspective. This is particularly important, given that research in the past has mainly employed a deficit-based perspective to the concept of autism (Urbanowicz, 2019), amplifying the medical model's dehumanisation, pathologisation, reductionism and essentialism, (Kapp, 2016) and rarely employed a strengths-based and context-based perspective, as employed within this study. Participants, therefore, challenged the myth that those who are marginalised and on the periphery of society are unable to take part in the creation of knowledge in academic circles (Peta, 2017) and highlighted the possibility of a collaborative approach such as that used in this study building a greater knowledge bank (Bargiela et al., 2016; Fletcher-Watson et. al., 2019; Gowen et. al., 2019; Milton et al., 2012; Milton, 2014; Tint & Weiss, 2018). Most of the women explained that it was their first time to be afforded a platform to share their work experiences and to talk openly about the factors that impacted on their professional working lives. They identified it as an enlightening experience and an opportunity to reflect. According to Ashby (2011), the practice of facilitating voices empowers individuals who might otherwise have remained silent to be heard and this was evident within the findings. The women had the opportunity to voice their own experiences and participate in their own construction of the self which also enabled them to achieve a sense of perspective and understanding of themselves. Some of the women identified how the study facilitated self-reflection and self-awareness and supported them to experience catharsis as a result of engaging in the research study and through the facilitation and openness in exploring themselves and their work journeys.

The appropriateness of the use of narrative interviewing under an overarching qualitative narrative research design as used in this study was deemed most appropriate for the study. In utilising this approach, the women felt that they were heard and listened to with respect, empathy, and trust. The findings as highlighted by the feedback from the women have demonstrated that the single open narrative interview technique and narrative approach

facilitated the voice of the women enabling them to contribute their experiences to academic knowledge.

6.5 Implications of the Findings

This section of the chapter will firstly outline the significant implications and impact of the findings in terms of its contribution to the existing body of literature within the field of autism and work. This is then followed by considering the implications of the findings for autistic graduate women and the autistic community, for employers and employment services, for higher education institutes, for policy development and for researchers.

6.5.1 Contribution to Knowledge

While there has been a growing body of literature examining the trajectories of autistic adults, autistic women are under-represented within this (Leedham et al., 2020; Taylor & DaWalt, 2020). Moreover, a paucity of research on the work experiences of autistic women is particularly evident (Baldwin et al., 2014; Gemma, 2021; Griffith, et al., 2012; Hayward et al., 2019; Kanfischer et al., 2017; Saxe, 2017). Specifically, no research was found on autistic graduate women, who had attended and completed higher education, thus potentially enhancing their employment outcomes. Additionally, there was a dearth of research including the subjective first-hand account of autistic women in exploring their experiences as they navigate the world of work. This study has begun to address these gaps and confirms and extends existing knowledge about the experiences of autistic graduate women and their work experiences and journeys. This study provides a valuable contribution into how autistic graduate women experience the world of work from an Irish context and identifies the significance of work from the perspective of autistic women. This study highlighted the complex work journeys for the women, which were influenced by a multitude of factors, including histories of unemployment and underemployment, frequent job changes and switches, return to education, and difficulties in creating and crafting a work journey. Furthermore, it offered insights into what contributed to

successful employment from the perspectives of the women, and this was attributed to utilising their passions and interests in developing a good job fit. They noted how employers, colleagues, and family support also acted as important employment enablers.

The study highlighted the complexity of work for autistic graduate women

Evident across the findings was the complexity of work. From this lens, the study highlights the many interacting and interconnected concepts and aspects that have shaped the women's experience of work, including the physical and sensory, the biological, social, cultural, institutional, and legal facets of society (Aldrich, 2008, Fogelberg & Frauwirth, 2010). In understanding the women's experiences, aspects such as the sensory environment, the double empathy problem, perceptions of the self and others, legislation associated with disclosure, supports, values and societal expectations, past experiences, education and health and wellbeing were interacting in a dynamic way, and this offered a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of work experience for these women. Additionally, it supports the notion that work is complex, and within this complex system, aspects interact with each other in dynamic, evolving, and unpredictable manner. It expands the possibilities for where and how to support and intervene within these different systems to yield change. Given the diversity of these interconnected aspects as described by the women, as well as their diverse experiences, it highlights the further need for adopting the concept of neurodiversity in the workplace, where inclusion is paramount and highlights how work for autistic women is bound by the broad range of social, cultural, economic variables that impact and condition human experience (Beck, 2023).

The majority of the women in this study were employed at the time of interviews. Despite the literature identifying part-time work or working less hours as a negative (Hayward et al., 2018a), it was found that working part-time facilitated the women in this study to be active and engaged within the labour market. It supported them in maintaining their working roles and this could be identified as a positive strategy employed by the women to be successful at work. These findings suggest the need for more flexible working

arrangements, such as, part-time work to enhance employment opportunities for autistic women.

There is a need for policy and legislation to consider complexity theory in the design of their policies, given that there is no-linearity in the concept of supporting work for autistic women and this requires considering the interconnected and interacting aspects that impact employment.

This study identified the experience of autistic burnout from engagement in the world of work

Evident across the findings of this study, was the multifaceted and unique pressures and demands that the women experienced from working in the neurotypical world. In an attempt to navigate work, one of the key findings highlighted how the women were employing strategies such as masking, and not disclosing to fit in at work and to counteract anticipatory negative experiences. Masking has been shown to impact on overall mental health for autistic individuals and therefore this study has highlighted how masking within the context of work did impact on the overall wellbeing of the women, as identified by experiencing autistic burnout.

Anecdotal accounts of autistic burnout have been shared informally within the autistic community for approximately two decades, but research is still in its infancy (Mantazalas et al., 2021). The findings from this study highlight how these autistic women experienced autistic burnout across their working journeys. Insights from this study could inform strategies to support autistic women at work to recognise the signs of burnout in themselves and their autistic peers.

Furthermore, healthcare professionals can play a crucial role in detecting and supporting autistic individuals experiencing autistic burnout. The findings may provide insight into what questions to ask relevant to burnout and how to best support their autistic clients,

contributing to improved quality of care and professional skill development and knowledge.

This study has enabled the voice of autistic women to be heard

This study has demonstrated the value and importance of hearing directly from autistic graduate women themselves. No studies were identified which explored the experiences of autistic women related to work. Hearing directly from the women provided insights into their personal experiences. By centralising the women and hearing their narratives brought “the previously silenced stories of women [...] from the margins to the centre” while shifting “voice” in ways that empower participants (Butler-Kisber, 2018, p. 73). The voices of the women within this study provided guidance for employers in supporting autistic women to thrive within the workplace. Hearing their first-hand advice can enable employers to make changes to ensure inclusion and neurodiversity within the workplace.

The study applied the neurodiversity perspective to explore the experiences of the women

Using the neurodiversity perspective to explore the experiences and influences on the women’s work lives indicates a significant contribution of this study to the current knowledge base. It indicates that future autism research must stop propagating the deficit model and adopt the account from within experience and advocate for the use of the neurodiversity perspective in conducting research that will ultimately benefit the autistic community, rather than further marginalise them.

6.5.2 Implications for the Autistic Community and Autistic Women

This study which foregrounds the accounts of autistic women contributes towards the increasing acknowledgement that autistic women have experience-based expertise, which is crucial in understanding and ‘knowing’ autism from a women’s perspective (Milton & Bracher, 2013). Autistic women are a hidden group within autism literature and there is a need to understand their experiences. This study positioned the women centre-stage,

providing an opportunity for knowledge to be generated. The women within the study highlighted how they never had an opportunity in the past to share and discuss experiences of work from their perspective. They hoped that this research would initiate a conversation around work for this group and perhaps act as a catalyst through which peer sharing could be fostered.

The study highlights to autistic women that while the world of work is complex that successful employment is possible. There are two specific messages here. Utilising and employing passions and interests can assist in developing a good job fit and is worthy of consideration by autistic women. Additionally, it highlighted that self-employment is a potentially successful employment path for autistic women. The women provided insights into why they were self-employed, and the benefits associated with being self-employed. The area of self-employment has received little examination within the current body of literature to date and this finding provides some preliminary evidence for how members of the autism community may be creatively engaging in self-employment as a means to gain and maintain work.

The women within the study shared how they accessed support and the strategies that they employed to manage the working world. This is important information for autistic women to hear. It could also be proposed that autistic women who have had experiences in navigating and maintaining work could act as mentors and peer supporters for other autistic women, therefore acting as agents of change (Webster & Garvis, 2017). There is a need to share success stories about work which can support the autistic community, breaking down any potential negative perceptions and highlighting the meaning and benefits of work.

A barrier identified by the women was their negative self-perceptions which began in childhood, and which permeated into their adult lives. These experiences impacted on the women in navigating work. Greater supports are needed to cultivate positive life

experiences for autistic women and the autistic community which in turn can support them in their working roles.

6.5.3 Implications for Employers and Employment Organisations

The findings provide a strong argument for the move away from the medical model view of autism, whereby challenges and deficits are seen within the person, towards an understanding of how society can have a disabling impact on autistic women. Here individuals are not impaired by their disability, but by societal barriers (Oliver, 1983). Examples of these disabling societal barriers were evident across the findings of this research. The women described various work situations where miscommunications and misunderstandings were apparent, contributing to their negative experiences within the workplace and a perceived sense of difference and need to fit in (Bury et al., 2021). From the perspective of the double empathy problem (Milton, 2017) the women described how they bear the burden of being held responsible for the difficulties that they experienced in their social interactions within the workplace, however evident was misunderstandings on both sides. To address this, the double empathy problem makes imperative the shift from defining and attempting to correct autistic individuals (Davis & Crompton, 2021) to facilitate the development of understanding between autistic and non-autistic members in the workplace. There is a need for employers and workplaces to shift their workplace culture and environments to one that accepts, appreciates, and values social differences and diversity. The double empathy problem shifts the focus towards diversity and recognition of this is essential in order to support autistic women within the workplace.

This study also suggests the need for the development of tailored and individualised supports to enhance employment opportunities for autistic women, recognising the heterogeneity of needs (Bury et al., 2020; Kargas et al., 2015; López et al., 2008; Loth et al., 2021; Praslova, 2021). The findings highlighted how women within this study benefited from accessing such supports.

The research also indicates the need for employers to consider the benefit of providing flexibility in working hours and working patterns for autistic women. Many of the women discussed how working part-time enabled them to participate in the working world while also managing their health and wellbeing and balance other roles.

Successful employment for autistic individuals includes modification of the physical and sensory work environment specifically as it relates to accommodating and enabling autistic individuals' participation at work. Principles of universal design could support the modification of the environment which not only benefits autistic employees but all employees.

As discussed, the findings of this study have implications for the continued need to shift societal, and employer attitudes towards understanding and appreciating diversity within the workplace. This is essential given that non-autistic adults often hold explicit and implicit biases toward autism that can contribute to personal and professional challenges for autistic people (Jones et., 2021). The women within the study were concerned about being discriminated against and indicated that they were fearful of stigma and stereotypes if they disclosed their autistic identity and employed strategies to fit in with the expectations of the workplace. To shift societal and employer attitudes, competitive employers must educate themselves and their human resource teams about autism. Autism acceptance within the workplace can be achieved through diversity training, as well as employing autistic people. The women within this study explained how they have extensive skills and attributes that can be beneficial and advocated for employers to recruit autistic women, as well as the need to listen to the autistic individual. Offering employment and supporting autistic women within the workplace will not only benefit employers but will lead to more inclusive and diverse workplaces and will also work towards reducing stereotyping and increase autism acceptance (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020; Soloman, 2020) and diversity within the workplace.

6.5.4 Implications for Higher Education Institutes

Widening participation does not just apply at entry to college and on accommodation whilst at university; it also needs to be actioned throughout college and during the transition from university into the workplace. This study highlighted that the journey from higher education posed challenges for the women, and they identified how they required support in crafting a work journey. Autistic individuals should be provided with assistance in managing the transition from university to employment. It is also imperative that services must utilise an individualised tailored approach to meet the needs of autistic women and neurodiverse students. Furthermore, universities and employers could work collaboratively to foster links and thus support autistic graduates entering the workplace.

6.5.5 Implications for Policy Development

The Irish Government published the 'Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024' in October 2015. One of the actions from phase one of the strategy emphasised the need to support graduates with disabilities in higher education in their transition from college to employment. Despite this being an action within the strategy, there is little evidence that this action has been achieved. This research contends that individualised transition planning services should be developed to enable autistic graduate women to successfully transition to employment.

Furthermore, for disability and employment policies to be effective and responsive to the needs of autistic women, it must be sensitive to the complexity of work experienced by autistic individuals. Therefore, it must address the systemic multifaceted issues that exist. Insight from the neurodiversity perspective would indicate that these policies should assume and acknowledge environmental complexity and interactions as a central policy feature in an attempt to widen participation for all, by exploring how the environment; including cultural, institutional, legal, structural and economic aspects can impact on participation and engagement in the world of work.

6.5.6 Implications for Researchers

The narrative inquiry approach to explore the work experiences of these women offered an alternative to the other methodologies used in the field of literature associated with autism and work, which have tended to be quantitative in nature. Recent calls within the autism literature have highlighted the need for more qualitative studies (van Schalkwyk & Dewinter, 2020) to describe a richer perspective into the lived experience. They also highlighted how employing a qualitative approach may be particularly informative to relatively unknown and underexplored areas such as experiences of employment (Dewinter et al., 2015; George & Stokes, 2018; Warner et al., 2019). This study utilised in-depth and multiple interviews together with the use of an object to further support the women in the telling of their stories. This was a novel approach to hearing the women's experiences and offered rich and descriptive accounts of a relatively unknown area within the field of autism and women. Utilising a narrative approach to autism research has promising potential.

The research provides some practical recommendations for researchers in conducting qualitative research with autistic women:

- Ask participants how they wish to be referred to in terms of their autistic identity.
- Conduct research from a neurodiversity framework perspective in line with the current neurodiversity movement (Kapp, 2020).
- Engage with a reference group of members of the autistic community in ensuring consent processes are as accessible as possible and that standardised consent forms are adapted as necessary in line with ethical agreement.
- Connect with online autistic communities to disseminate information on the research study.
- Maintain an open and transparent communication pathway with participants about the research and its aims and answer any questions that the participants have in a timely manner.

- Build trust and a rapport with participants. This is an ongoing process of listening, paying respect, be open and willing to learn and ensuring that answers to their questions have been provided in a comprehensive manner.
- Ensure and create flexible qualitative methods of data collection to support the research question.
- Consider offering advanced access to materials including prefaces to support participants understand the expectation of the research and provide specificity in terms of questions that will be posed.
- Conducting interviews online may prove to be more accessible for autistic women and participants.
- Conduct several de-briefs with the participants throughout the data collection process to support them in their participation.

6.6 A Critical Evaluation of the Study

6.6.1 Strengths of the Study

There were sound ontological and epistemological reasons for using narrative inquiry as a methodology within this study. Congruent with the epistemological position and the methodology employed (Loh, 2013; Patton, 2002), Lincoln, and Guba's (1985) quality control techniques to ensure rigour and trustworthiness to evaluate the quality of the study were employed. These techniques and approaches have been extensively discussed in the methodology chapter and in Appendix L.

This study is uniquely positioned. There is a paucity of studies which explored autistic women's experience of work and even more so autistic graduate women. Roche, Adams, and Clarke (2021) recently conducted a systematic review to identify key stakeholders' priorities for autism research. Common features across all included studies, which were conducted in the United States, Europe, the United Kingdom, and Canada, identified the need for research in the real-world to support the lives of members of the autistic community. One of the top priorities was the need for further consideration of childhood into adulthood including employment. The review also identified the imperative need for

continued inclusion of autistic communities in research to progress the field in an effective and socio-ethical way. Thus, this study has the potential to be ‘intrinsically interesting’ to autistic women, the autistic community, employers, higher education institutes and policy makers (Tracy, 2010).

This study utilised a reference group in the early stages of the study to not only guide the research design but also to explore whether a study of this nature was warranted and whether there was a need for this study within an Irish context, given the lack of identified autism research priorities within Ireland. They welcomed research in this area and the importance of this study to autistic women was reflected in the findings of Study Three.

This study was conceived as an exploration of the work experiences of autistic graduate women within the context of the Republic of Ireland. This study did not set out to develop substantive theory nor to prove a hypothesis, rather it aimed to build understandings of the work experiences and journeys of autistic graduate women. In employing a narrative inquiry approach, the perspectives and experiences of the women were gathered. Exploring autistic women’s own perspectives brings them forward as agents in their own lives instead of passive recipients. The narrative process supports research that goes beyond the practice of classifying and pathologising but addresses the intricacies and interconnected aspects associated with the phenomenon of work and autism, with the cultural, social, institutional, and economic factors that create and impact on the lives of autistic women.

A key strength of this study is how it captured the richness and depth of the women’s experiences. The specific use of open questioning within narrative interviewing gave voice to the women and likely supported them to reveal aspects of their work experiences which would not have been achievable within a more structured interview format. It delivers on Fasulo’s (2019) suggestion that it may be more productive for “autistic research to dislodge itself from its normative standpoint and go meet autism on its own ground” (p. 624).

Analysis of autistic women's narratives is one step towards a more open and alternative path in which autism research is conducted.

6.6.2 Limitations of the Study

Quality measures were employed within the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), however narrative inquiry also has its limitations. It is imperative to note that only a partial picture of the worlds of the women can be presented (Josselson, 2011; Pasupathi et al., 2009) and what is available to us is not the actual life lived by the women but rather the life as told by them through their narratives (Plummer, 2001). Atkinson and Delamont (2006, p. 165) caution that "a narrative of a personal experience is not a clear route to the 'truth' either about the reported events or the teller's private experience." Polkinghorne (2007) argues that narratives represent personal meaning and therefore researchers' access 'narrative truth' rather than 'historical truth' in narrative inquiry. Thus, it is important that the findings of this narrative inquiry study are interpreted in this context.

Narrative inquiry utilises multiple methods of data collection and analysis and is a broad methodological approach which takes time to fully appreciate and understand (Lyons & Roulstone, 2018). Given that this was the first time that I had used narrative inquiry as a methodology this may have impacted on the interview approach. I did upskill in the area of narrative research and completed a postgraduate certificate in Narrative Research with the University of East London prior to conducting the study. I also conducted five days of training in understanding the Biographic-Narrative-Interpretive-Method. Furthermore, I employed my professional years of experience as an occupational therapist in working with autistic women and utilised these skills within the interview process.

In the interviewing context, the advice from the reference group was that the women be provided with the open-interview question in advance of the first interview. This, however, may have impacted on the women's responses, whereby they may have rehearsed and

edited narratives. Being mindful of this situation, I employed my interview skills and attempted to probe further to obtain as much depth as possible in their stories, while remaining sensitive to the women's accounts. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic the interviews which were planned to be conducted face-to-face took place online, using virtual methods. It is possible that this interview context affected the nature of the data generated, however, I did employ several strategies as outlined in the Methodology Chapter, to facilitate an atmosphere of safety and respect at all times. The online approach was appreciated and identified as a benefit to the participants within Study Three.

Five of the participants did not engage with the use of the object to further elicit their experiences of work. It may be that the participants found it difficult to choose an object or that they forgot to consider what object to choose. I did not push the women towards this, although it is possible that other aspects relating to their experiences of work could have been captured had they used one.

The sample of twelve women is deemed to be sufficient for a narrative study of this nature (Guetterman, 2015; Wengraf, 2001), given that it utilised multiple interviews for richness, and depth of nuanced experiences (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). The sample size is reflective of previous research with a narrative inquiry methodology (Kanfischer et al., 2017, Krieger et al, 2012, Peta, 2017, Flynn & McGregor, 2018). Furthermore, the inclusion criteria for participating in this study was that all women had to have attended, completed, or withdrawn from higher education within the past ten years. Therefore, the study and its findings cannot be generalised and nor does it claim to be generalisable, to all autistic women. The women held educational qualifications at third level. In addition, this study was conducted in, and sought recruitment of, participants in 2020. If this study was conducted today, it is likely that more autistic women would come forward to participate, given that there has been a pivotal change within the autistic community within Ireland, with more women identifying as autistic, as per anecdotal evidence from the online autistic community.

Guidelines for the standard of a Ph.D. study are provided within the Trinity College Dublin academic calendar. They state that a doctoral thesis “must show evidence of rigour and discrimination, appreciation of the relationship of the subject to a wider field of knowledge/scholarship, and make an appreciable, original contribution to knowledge; it should show originality in the methods used and/or conclusions drawn, and must be clear, concise, well written and orderly and must be a candidate’s own work.” (Trinity College Dublin, 2024, p. 43). I argue that this has been achieved and that this study has contributed to our understanding of the experiences and journeys of autistic graduate women in their navigation of the world of work. It has highlighted the novel approach to hear the voices of the women and in building our understanding of the context of work for autistic graduate women.

6.7 Future Research Directions

In addressing the research question, this study has provided a comprehensive insight into the experiences of autistic graduate women in navigating the world of work. Given the increasing representation of autistic individuals in the workplace, understanding this lived experience is essential. The study helps to identify the multiple and interconnected aspects that influence the working lives for autistic women, highlighting various approaches that can be implemented to make employment and the world of work more inclusive. The research highlights the importance of co-designing workplace interventions and supports, rather than the top-down and unitarist approaches that have dominated the field of autism research in the area of work and employment to date. In conducting this study, the neurodiversity perspective was employed, future research would benefit from applying these neurodiversity principles, which have been underapplied in research to future research in the area of autism and employment. Future research projects could include:

- The experiences of autistic women generally, who have not had the opportunity to attend higher education to ascertain if their experiences of employment and work are qualitatively different. Previous research has not explored autistic women’s experiences of work, therefore it unknown whether they have similar or different

experiences. The methodological approach utilised in this study could be replicated, given that it was identified as a useful method by the women in the study.

- Stories of successful employment were evident within the findings of this study. Thus, further qualitative research which aims to explore the factors and influences that enable and support employment from the perspectives of autistic women and autistic individuals would add value to our understanding and enhance employment opportunities for the future.
- The women in this study highlighted the challenges in developing a disclosure narrative for the workplace. Further research aimed at exploring the experiences of autistic women who have disclosed would support our understanding in how they navigated the process and could inform the process of devising advice and guidance for autistic women in navigating the complicated decision-making process of disclosure to support them in devising a personal disclosure narrative.
- This study identified that the women experienced autistic burnout across their working lives. This was the first study to identify autistic burnout within the context of work and highlights the need for further exploration of this phenomenon on a wider scale. A survey exploring autistic burnout experiences within the world of work and across gender identities would further our understanding of a concept that is only in its infancy and may support a greater understanding and highlight further steps that could be addressed to mitigate the experience within the context of work.
- A study exploring the intersection of gender and autism and work, would be worthwhile. This study did not aim to explore how gender role expectations impact on the work experiences of these autistic women. The research did identify how some of the women did have additional mothering roles which played into their experiences of managing work, however further research in this area is warranted, given that autistic women also hold other gendered roles in society which may impact on their work journeys and experiences.
- This study did identify some implications for higher education institutes in relation to supporting autistic graduates, however, further research is warranted. With the ever-increasing number of autistic individuals entering higher education in Ireland

and therefore transitioning to employment, there is a need to explore the perceptions of autistic students and graduates about support related to the university-to-work transition. Furthermore, there is a need to examine the perceived supporting factors for employment within university students and graduates and to identify what universities can further do to support autistic individuals prepare for their transition to the workplace, with the potential to improve current practices in higher education, and to increase the employability prospects for autistic graduates.

- Albeit we must centralise the voices of autistic individuals, we also need to explore what steps employers are taking to support neurodiversity within their workplaces and the impact of their actions for employee's. From an Irish perspective, there is no research to date exploring neurodiversity practices within the workplace, which potentially widens the science-practice divide, keeping neurodiversity at the margins of organisational practices, inclusivity, and scholarly debate.
- In a follow on to this research study, I the researcher have begun establishing collaborations with autistic researchers and autistic advocates in Ireland, to develop a community of practice that will conduct research that is valuable and important to the members of the Irish autistic community. In doing so, we aim to utilise participatory research approaches which will enable meaningful input from autistic people in autism research, as a way to overcome barriers to effective translation and to ensure that research yields relevant benefits to the Irish community (Long et al., 2017).

6.8 Final Reflections

I came to this study from professional practice working with autistic women, as well as being involved with the autistic community. I had previously conducted a study exploring the transition to employment for disabled students and became particularly interested in the experiences of autistic women as they made the transition to work. As a non-autistic researcher, I wanted to engage and consult with the autistic community to ascertain whether this research mattered and was of importance to them. Consultation with the

reference group confirmed this and provided useful insights and ideas into the study design.

I had some prior experience of qualitative research but knew very little about narrative inquiry, however through my professional work, I noted how autistic women tended to share their stories with me. Along the research journey, there were many challenges in relation to enhancing my knowledge about the chosen methodology and in ensuring that I upskilled in the methods used. I set out to hear the voices of the women and I contend that the methodology did achieve this. The women shared their stories at great length with me and it was evident that a trusting relationship had been achieved through their engagement and openness in the interview process. The stories and experiences that the women shared were powerful. It highlighted that there is an important place in listening to the voices of autistic women. The use of the object as a prop alongside this supported a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Throughout the research process, I endeavoured to employ good practice guidelines in conducting research with the autism community, drawing on the literature and my professional experience. I believe that this supported the research process, created an enabling environment, and enhanced trust, mutual respect, and dialogue. I maintained an ethical stance throughout the process, and I am aware of my responsibilities as a researcher and the debt of gratitude that I owe to the twelve women who gave so generously of their time. I will be returning to the women with a summary of the research and with a plan to disseminate the findings and insights gained to the wider autistic community.

As I conclude this research study, I assert that we need to continue to listen to the voices of autistic women, experts in their own lives, to shape and inform work practices and policies into the future.

6.9 Concluding Comments

The growth of autistic self-advocacy and the neurodiversity movement has brought about new ethical, theoretical, and ideological debates within autism theory and research (Kapp, 2020). However, its influence is less evident in the world of work, and this was evidenced by the nuanced and detailed accounts shared by the women who are best placed to share their experiences and highlight the need for change, because a neurotypical work society is failing to consider their needs.

I argue and contend that employers and employment organisations need to understand and actively engage with the views of autistic people and with neurodiversity as a perspective and movement. There is a critical need to move away from a normative agenda and pay diligence to environmental goodness-of-fit, internal drivers and personal experiences.

This research suggests more must be done to support autistic graduate women to gain and maintain employment and to mitigate some of the barriers that exist for these women. Challenging the status quo and demanding change is critical, employers and the working world must shift the paradigm and adopt the neurodiversity perspective in order for autistic women to utilise their knowledge, skills, abilities, and talents for benefit and to thrive within the workplace.

7 References

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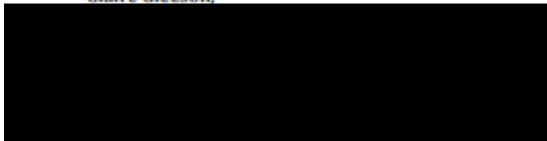
8 Appendices

Appendix A: Trinity College Dublin Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Approval Letter



Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
Trinity College Dublin
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

Claire Gleeson,



Ref: 161002

Title of Study: Exploring the lived experiences of Woman with Autism Spectrum Disorder/ Asperger's Syndrome post university

Dear Claire,

Further to a meeting of the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Committee held in November 2016, we are pleased to inform you that the above project has been approved without further audit.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Prof. Brian O'Connell'.

Prof. Brian O'Connell
Chairperson
Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Dámh na nEolaiochtaí Sláinte
Foirgneamh na Ceimice,
Coláiste na Tríonóide,
Ollscoil Átha Cliath,
Baile Átha Cliath 2, Éire.

Faculty of Health Sciences
Chemistry Building,
Trinity College Dublin,
The University of Dublin,
Dublin 2, Ireland.

www.healthsciences.tcd.ie

Appendix B: Trinity College Dublin Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Amendment Approval Letter



Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
Trinity College Dublin
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

Claire Gleeson
Discipline of Occupational Therapy,
Trinity Centre for Health Sciences,
St. James Hospital,
James's Street,
Dublin 8

7th December 2018

Ref: 161002

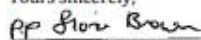
Title of Study: Exploring the lived experiences of Women with Autism Spectrum Disorder/ Asperger's Syndrome post university.

Dear Claire,

Further to a meeting of the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Committee held November 2018, we are pleased to inform you that the above project (as amended with the following changes) has ethical approval to proceed.

- Request to change the length of data collection from end date; November 2019 to January 2020, in line with submission of dissertation and maternity leave taken in 2018.
- Request to change the inclusion criteria; change from Females who have completed a university/college/third level education degree within the past 10 years; to Females who have started, withdrawn or completed from a university/college/third level education degree within the past 10 years.
- In light of this change, the following appendices will be amended accordingly:
- Appendix 1: Letter/Email to Gatekeeper requesting permission for Research Study to be publicised on their Websites, Social media pages and to be sent to their database of followers.
- Appendix 2: Information to be sent to Gatekeepers to publicise the research Study on Websites, Social Media Sites etc.
- Appendix 3: PARTICIPATION INFORMATION LEAFLET
- Appendix 4: INFORMED CONSENT FORM
- Appendix 5: Interview Questions

As a researcher you must ensure that you comply with other relevant regulations, including DATA PROTECTION and HEALTH AND SAFETY.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Brian O'Connell
Chairperson
Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Appendix C: Trinity College Dublin Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Amendment Approval Letter



Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
Trinity College Dublin
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

Claire Gleeson,
Discipline of Occupational Therapy,
Trinity Centre for Health Sciences,
St James's Hospital, James's Street,
D08 W9RT, Dublin 8,
Ireland.

4th February 2020

Ref: 161002

Title of Study: Exploring the lived experiences of women with Autism Spectrum disorder in pursuing employment post college.

Dear Claire,

Further to a meeting of the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Committee held in January 2020, we are pleased to inform you that the above project (as amended with the following changes) has ethical approval to proceed.

This study has been ethically approved. We would advise you to seek review and comments on your DPIA from the DPO if required prior to study commencement'

Please give specific details of the requested amendment(s):

The researcher wishes to make some amendments to the research study. Previously the study was broad and wished to explore the lived experiences (generally) of women with Autism Spectrum Disorder, during their time in college, their transition out of college and their employment life. However, the researcher has refined the study and solely wishes to explore in particular, the experiences of women with autism in pursuing and maintaining employment post college. The changes have been made to the ethics form with this refinement in mind.

- Title of the study has been refined and made more precise. Please see section 1 and 2.1.
- Additional Supervisor has been added-see section 1.1.
- Request to extend the length of the research study to September 2021, in line with refinement of the study. Please see section 2.2.
- Central Research Question and aims have been refined in line with the changes. See section 2.4.
- Additional background added in relation to refinement of the study objectives. Please see section 2.5.
- Section 2.7-Rather than females in the inclusion criteria-changed term to women. And rather than diagnosed in line with population request changed to 'identify' as having autism spectrum disorder.
- Section 3.1-Added; Participants will have access to transcripts if they wish.
- Section 3.3. Wording slightly changed-highlighted in red.
- In light of the changes identified above, the appendices have been amended accordingly:
 1. Appendix 1: Letter/Email to Gatekeeper requesting permission for Research Study to be publicised on their Websites, Social media pages and to be sent to their database of followers.
 2. Appendix 2: Poster for Charities/Organisations to advertise the research Project
 3. Appendix 3: PARTICIPATION INFORMATION LEAFLET
 4. Appendix 4: INFORMED CONSENT FORM
 5. Appendix 5: Interview Process

As a researcher you must ensure that you comply with other relevant regulations, including DATA PROTECTION and HEALTH AND SAFETY.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Jacintha O'Sullivan
Chairperson
Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Appendix D: Trinity College Dublin Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Amendment Approval Letter



Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
Trinity College Dublin
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

Ms. Claire Irene Gleeson,
Discipline of Occupational Therapy,
Trinity Centre for Health Science,
St. James Hospital,
James St.,
Dublin 8

6th April 2020

Ref: 161002

Title of Study: Exploring the lived experiences of women with Autism Spectrum disorder in pursuing employment post college.

Dear Claire,

Further to a meeting of the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Committee held in April 2020, we are pleased to inform you that the above project (as amended with the following changes) has ethical approval to proceed. We would advise you to seek review and comments on your DPIA from the DPO if required prior to study commencement.

Please give specific details of the requested amendment(s):

The researcher wishes to make one amendment to the research study. Given the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the researcher wishes to now include the option of conducting the interviews via online means; such as Skype or Zoom. The interviews will be audio recorded only for the purpose of transcription.

This change has been made on the ethics form under section: 2.5.

As a researcher you must ensure that you comply with other relevant regulations, including DATA PROTECTION and HEALTH AND SAFETY.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Jacintha O'Sullivan
Chairperson
Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Dámh na nEalaíochtaí Sláinte
Foirgneamh na Ceimice,
Coláiste na Tríonóide,
Ollscoil Átha Cliath,
Baile Átha Cliath 2, Éire.

Faculty of Health Sciences
Chemistry Building,
Trinity College Dublin,
The University of Dublin,
Dublin 2, Ireland.

www.healthsciences.tcd.ie

Appendix E: Participant Information Leaflet



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LEAFLET

PROJECT TITLE: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Women with Autism Spectrum Disorder in pursuing employment post college.

RESEARCHER: Claire I. Gleeson, PhD Student, Discipline of Occupational Therapy, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin.

SUPERVISORS: Dr. Clodagh Nolan, Dr. Elizabeth McKay and Dr. Michelle Spirtos.

DATA CONTROLLER: Trinity College Dublin.

My name is Claire Gleeson, and I am a PhD student, studying in the Discipline of Occupational Therapy in Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

Little is known about the experiences of women with autism/autistic women in their pursuit and maintenance of employment, and even more so within an Irish context. Therefore, this research aims to address this gap and aims to explore and find out more about the experiences women with autism have as they exit college and pursue employment.

WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

The researcher would like to meet and interview women who identify as having Autism Spectrum Disorder and talk to them about their experiences since leaving college and to find out more about their journey in pursuing employment. Participants will have to be over 18 years of age and have either completed or withdrawn from a course at a higher education institute within the past ten years.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you think you wish to share your experiences as a woman with Autism Spectrum Disorder and want to get involved in this research study, you can contact the researcher; Claire Gleeson, and she will further explain the aim and format of the study and discuss any questions you may have about the study. If at this stage, you agree to take part in the research, the researcher will then arrange to meet you at a location and at a time that suits you to further explain the aims of the study, and to ask you to sign an informed consent form which outlines the aim of the study and states that you understand what is involved in taking part in the study. Once you have signed this form, the interview stage will then take place. You will be required to partake in two interviews at two different times with the researcher, where you will be interviewed and asked questions about your experiences as a woman with Autism Spectrum Disorder and in particular about your experiences since leaving college and your journey in seeking and maintaining employment. If there is a need a third interview may need to be planned. Please be advised that all interviews will be recorded via a Dictaphone and later transcribed verbatim by the investigator, or another employed individual to help with transcribing the data. This individual will sign a letter ensuring confidentiality of all information.

At the first interview, there will be an opening question, asking you to talk about your experiences as a woman with Autism Spectrum Disorder since leaving college and in seeking employment. This will be followed by some additional questions. The second interview will be more focused and will ask you more specific questions relating to pursuing and maintaining employment. In the second interview you will be asked to bring an object/item or photograph that can be used as a discussion point and that relates to your experiences since leaving college and in seeking and maintaining employment. The interviews may take approximately one hour to two hours to complete, depending on the length of your story and experiences.

Please read this Participation Information Leaflet carefully and think about your desire to participate.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE FINDINGS PRODUCED FROM THE STUDY?

The narratives that you provide during the interviews and the other participants narratives, will form the basis of the researcher's PhD thesis and will be published in that way. They may also be published in appropriate journals and presented at both national and international conferences. Please be advised that no personally identifiable information will be included in the research reports or any other publication of the study results. Personal identifiable information will not be published or disclosed to anyone outside the study. All information gathered will be coded with a number or a pseudonym which you can choose to ensure that only the researcher and supervisors know your identity.

All information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet or as encrypted files on password protected computers. If you wish to access your information at any stage, it will be made available to you. After a period of five years this data will be destroyed, in keeping with the policies of the University. Under data protection law you can exercise specific rights in relation to your personal data, unless the request would make it impossible or very difficult to conduct the research. You can exercise these rights by contacting the research team or the Trinity College Data Protection Officer, Secretary's Office, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland. Email: dataprotection@tcd.ie.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?

In talking about and recalling past experiences, you may be disclosing information of a sensitive nature and you may become upset in doing so. No pressure will be put on you during the interview to discuss issues that you may not feel comfortable talking about. If you find any aspect stressful or difficult, you can discuss it with the researcher. You may become distressed recalling past experiences and if this occurs, the researcher will stop the interview. She will check with you to see whether you wish to stop the interview outright or wish to continue. You are free to withdraw or leave the study at any point. If you become distressed recalling past experiences, the researcher will provide you with information in relation to supports available within the community that you may wish and need to avail of.

SOME SUPPORTS INCLUDE:

DUBDOC-Out of Hours GP Service: Telephone: 01 4545607

GP Out of Hours Service Nationally:

<http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/3/outofhours/GPOOH.html>

Samaritans: <http://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help-you/contact-us> or call: 116 123 (ROI)

Directory of Services: <http://www.aspireireland.ie/cmsWP/directory-of-service/>

Participants will be advised from the outset of their interviews that should they disclose a serious criminal offence, that the researcher will be required to report it to the relevant authorities.

WHAT MIGHT EXCLUDE ME FROM THE STUDY?

It is important to note that there are some exclusion criteria that may exempt you from being able to take part in the study, these include:

- You are male
- You are a woman under 18 years of age.
- You are woman but do not identify with a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder or Asperger's Syndrome.
- You are a woman but did not go to university/ college/ within the past 10 years.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO MY TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The research aims to explore the lived experiences of women with Autism Spectrum Disorder following their exit from college and their pursuit of employment. This research will aid in providing a better understanding of the needs of women with Autism Spectrum Disorder and may potentially shape future research and address a gap in the knowledge and literature that exists. You may also benefit from the opportunity to talk about your diagnosis, your experience and speak openly about your life events. There are no direct benefits to participating in the study.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DO NOT DECIDE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you volunteer to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time. You are not obliged to participate, and if you decide not to participate, or if you withdraw, you will not be penalised and you will not give up any benefits that you had before entering the study.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?

Your identity and any personalised information will remain confidential throughout the research project. The final report may be published but your name will not be published, or any distinguishing information will not be published or disclosed to anyone outside the study group; which comprises of the investigator Claire Gleeson or her research supervisors; Dr. Clodagh Nolan, Dr. Elizabeth McKay and Dr. Michelle Spirtos and the person who will be employed to transcribe the interviews, who will sign a confidentiality agreement form. If you name other persons, their names or distinguishing information will be removed.

WHAT IS THE LAWFUL BASIS TO USE MY PERSONAL DATA?

Under Articles 6 & 9 of the EU General Data Protection Regulation ('GDPR') your personal information will be used for scientific research in the public interest. We will also ask for your explicit consent to use your data as a requirement of the Irish Health Research Regulations.

COMPENSATION

This study is covered by standard institutional indemnity insurance. Nothing in this document restricts or curtails your rights.

WITHDRAWAL FROM THE STUDY

It is also important to be aware that you understand that the researcher may withdraw your participation in the study at any time without your consent.

HAS ETHICAL PERMISSION BEEN GRANTED TO CONDUCT THIS STUDY?

Yes, this study has ethical approval from the Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you would like more information or answers to your questions about the study, your participation in the study, and your rights, please contact the research investigator, Claire Gleeson; 087 9369069, email: clgleeso@tcd.ie or contact the research supervisors; Dr Clodagh Nolan; 01 896 3218 email: nolandcl@tcd.ie or Dr. Michelle Spirtos email: spirtosa@tcd.ie If the investigator learns of important new information that might affect your desire to remain in the study, you will be informed at once.

Appendix F: Participant Consent Form



Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

The University of Dublin

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PROJECT TITLE

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Women with Autism Spectrum Disorder in pursuing employment post college.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Claire I. Gleeson, PhD Student, Discipline of Occupational Therapy, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin.

BACKGROUND

I understand that by participating in this research project I am agreeing to be interviewed by the researcher Claire Gleeson on two occasions about my life experiences as a woman identifying with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I understand that she will ask questions about my life since leaving college, my experiences of employment and about my current life. I understand that I will be recalling experiences from my past and present life. I understand that the interviews will be recorded on a Dictaphone and later transcribed by the investigator or another employed individual to help with transcribing the data. I understand that this employed person will sign a letter ensuring confidentiality of all information.

I understand that I will not be identified by my own name and my identity will be coded throughout the study. I understand that I will choose a pseudonym to replace my own name, which will not be my online name. I understand that any personal distinguishing characteristics or circumstances will not be disclosed in the research PhD report or in any presentations, write-ups and publications of the study results. I understand that the researchers will advise me from the outset of the interviews that should I disclose a serious criminal offence or other disclosures requiring actions such that the researcher will have to report it to the relevant authorities and that it cannot be kept with the researcher.

I acknowledge that the research project will be published as a PhD dissertation and maybe be published as a journal article, presented at conferences or it may be used for other educational purposes. I understand that the data / information will be stored for the duration of the study, i.e. until the work is fully reported and disseminated. It will then be kept in a locked cabinet for five years as per accepted best practice.

DECLARATION

General	Yes / No

I have read, or had read to me, the information leaflet for this project and I understand the contents.	
I have had the opportunity to ask questions and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	
I freely and voluntarily agree to be part of this research study, though without prejudice to my legal and ethical rights.	
I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time.	
I have received a copy of this agreement.	
I understand that personal information about me will be protected in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation.	
I know how to contact the research team if I need to.	

PARTICIPANT'S NAME:

CONTACT DETAILS:

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE:

Date:

Statement of investigator's responsibility: I have explained the nature and purpose of this research study, the procedures to be undertaken and any risks that may be involved. I have offered to answer any questions and fully answered such questions. I believe that the participant understands my explanation and has freely given informed consent.

INVESTIGATOR'S SIGNATURE:

Date:

(Keep the original of this form in the investigator's file, give one copy to the participant).

Appendix G: Letter to Gatekeepers

Research Study- Autistic Women's Experiences in pursuing employment - Message (HTML)

File Message Help Tell me what you want to do

Share to Teams Mark Unread Find Zoom Viva Insights Reply with Meeting Poll

Research Study- Autistic Women's Experiences in pursuing employment

CG Claire Gleeson
To: Claire Gleeson

Reply Reply All Forward

Sun 23/02/2020 10:46

You forwarded this message on 23/02/2020 10:49.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LEAFLET_Women's Experiences.pdf 162 KB

Call for Participation in Research .pdf 53 KB

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Claire Gleeson and I am a PhD Student in the Discipline of Occupational Therapy, Trinity College Dublin. I am currently conducting a research project entitled: "Exploring the Lived Experiences of Women with Autism Spectrum Disorder in pursuing employment post college." I am interested in meeting with women to explore their experiences in pursuing employment following their exit from higher education, whether they complete their course or not. Little is known about the experiences of women in seeking and maintaining employment, some studies demonstrate that people with autism struggle in finding employment and therefore, this research aims to hear the voices and the experiences of these women.

Therefore, I am contacting you to inquire as to whether your charity/organisation would consider acting as a gatekeeper for the recruitment of the research sample; women with Autism Spectrum Disorder who have or have not completed a third level degree? This would require your charity/organisation to either:

1. circulate a short email to your database of subscribers along with a Participant Information Leaflet (please see attached) or
2. to either publish some information on the study on your website, social media pages or on your newsletter? I attach a poster about the study, which you may like to publicise. I have also set up a Twitter and Facebook Page which provides information on the study for circulation to the community, you may like to re-tweet/share the information. Details of these accounts are:

Twitter account: Autistic Women's Experiences of Employment
@womens_stories

Facebook account: <https://www.facebook.com/AutisticWomensStories>

Please be advised that this research study has been approved by the Faculty of Health Science Ethics Committee in Trinity College Dublin.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this application and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Kind Regards,
Claire I Gleeson, M.Sc., AdvCertEd., B.Sc. (Cur. Occ.).
PhD Student, Discipline of Occupational Therapy, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin.
Phone: 087 9569069 Email: claireg@tcd.ie

Appendix H: Poster for Advertising the Study

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES;

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Women with Autism Spectrum Disorder in seeking employment post college.



INTRODUCTION

Hi, my name is Claire I.Gleeson and I am a PhD student studying in the Discipline of Occupational Therapy in Trinity College, Dublin.

I am currently carrying out research into the experiences of women with autism in pursuing employment following their exit from higher education. Little is known about the experiences of women in seeking and maintaining employment. I am interested in hearing your story and the stories of women, because very little is known in Ireland.

WHO CAN GET INVOLVED?

- Women who identify as having Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Women who have either completed or have withdrawn from a course in higher education (college, university)
- Women who are willing to tell their story about their life after higher education and their experiences of employment.

WHATS INVOLVED?

You would be required to participate in two interviews, with me on two separate occasions. In the interviews, you would be asked to tell your story of your life since college and your experiences of work. The interviews would take place at a time and place of convenience to you.

INTERESTED?

If you are interested in the study and would like more information and/or answers to your questions, please contact me.

CONTACT DETAILS:

Claire Gleeson;
Phone: 087 9369069
Email: clgleeso@tcd.ie

Appendix I: Example of a Timeline for a Participant- Moving from Interview One to Interview Two- Preliminary Analysis-Preparing for Interview Two- Step: Developing a Timeline



The collage consists of several pieces of paper with handwritten notes and a central mind map diagram.

Top Left Paper:

- Chadwick**
- P - NPO**
- Child - ready to go in control party with no special needs
- Meaning - no doubt fit in
- Got to follow in your path
- Standard - an area of research
- done well academically
- default to make it
- colleges needed a rule
- Open to a few
- Support - need to go to school
- Dr. Co. author
- little input from family

Top Right Paper:

- DI - DR**
- Dr. Co. - ready to go in control party with no special needs
- Meaning - no doubt fit in
- Got to follow in your path
- Standard - an area of research
- done well academically
- default to make it
- colleges needed a rule
- Open to a few
- Support - need to go to school
- Dr. Co. author
- little input from family

Bottom Left Paper:

- Dr. Co. author**
- little input from family

Bottom Right Paper:

- Dr. Co. author**
- little input from family

Central Mind Map Diagram:

- PN** (Central Node)
- Education** (Top Node)
- Return to Education** (Top-Right Node)
- Dr. Co. author** (Right Node)
- little input from family** (Bottom-Right Node)
- Dr. Co. author** (Bottom Node)
- little input from family** (Bottom-Left Node)
- Dr. Co. author** (Left Node)
- little input from family** (Top-Left Node)

Appendix K: Sample of Interview Schedule for Interview Two

Draft Schedule for Interview 2

Interview 2- Sub session 3

These interview questions listed below are not in order of how they are being asked directly by the researcher to the participant -they are asked as the interview progresses and some topics may emerge or evolve in the conversation and therefore, they are introduced at that point.

The researcher may also ask the participant to elaborate further on a specific area or may also engage in more internal probing to further clarify or develop an area of discussion.

Opening Questions:

Thanks again for taking the time to share your experiences with me, how has everything been for you since we last spoke?

You shared lots of your experiences in your first interview, have you reflected on this anymore? Do you have any further thoughts or comments that have come to mind since we last spoke that you would like to share?

Question related to the prop:

Explore if this comes up more naturally in the conversation and interview.... But if not, ask;

“We talked about the possibility of sharing an item/photo/object that depicts/expresses your story since leaving college and seeking employment, is there anything you would like to share?”

Can you tell me about this item/object/photo?

Follow up from last interview:

- You said that you were doing ‘special interest’ all your life- can you tell me how you got into it and your journey with it?

College Experience:

- On returning to college, you studied in the area of ‘finance and business’, can you tell me why you wanted to study this?
- Can you tell me more about your college experience?
- Do you think college prepared you for employment?
- You said that you returned to college in year X, at night, can you tell me about this?

Work:

- Can you tell me more about your current job?
- In your job you mentioned how you practised communicating, can you tell me about how you practised this?

- We talked about managing people as an employer when we spoke last and dealing with employees and confrontation- you were saying you are afraid of confrontation; can you tell me why you think you are afraid of it?
- You said you 'like working' on your own, what is it that you like about working on your own?
- You said you wouldn't like to work in an office, can you tell me why?
- Can you talk me through a day in the life of your current job?
- What meaning do you associate with work and employment?
- What importance do you place on your work? Is work important to you?
- What do you feel you have to navigate in terms of employment?
- You are a mother and wife, can you tell me how you balance and manage your roles, do these roles have any influence on your worker role?

Autism:

- In your last interview you said 'I KNOW MORE ABOUT MYSELF NOW' - and you were talking about this in terms of reflecting back on experiences, can you tell me more about what you mean by this?
- You talked about 'Masking' a lot in the past and hiding who you are/were and the fear of other people seeing the 'real you' - why do you think you did mask and purpose did it serve you?
- What were your thoughts when you found out that you were autistic? Did anything change for you?
- How does autism shape your world of work?
- What does being autistic mean to you?

Future:

- Can you tell me about your dreams for your career going forward?

- What would you identify as your strengths and challenges?

- Can you tell me your views on whether you think autism has impacted on you pursuing and maintaining employment and in what way?
- Do you think autism resulted in you experiencing any challenges?
- What are your plans and goals for the future?
- What would be your dream job?

Views on autism

- Can I get your views on some general areas related to autism and women and the workplace....
 - Can you share your thoughts on whether autistic women are discriminated within the workplace... and if so and why?
 - What do you think would support autistic women in terms of services and supports?
 - Can you tell me what you think employers can do to support autistic women at work?
 - What's your thoughts on autistic women having the same opportunities as non-autistic women?

Questions relating to BNIM and the interview process...

- Can you tell me how you found the interview process overall?
- Did you find any particular parts of the interview process difficult or challenging? Please explain.
- Have you any suggestions on how I could improve the interviews, or the questions asked?
- Can you remember why you decided to take part in the study? What do you think doing these interviews might add?

Pseudonym

Is there a particular pseudonym you would like to use for the write up of the study?

De-brief

—
Thanks, so much for taking the time to be interviewed and for participating in the study-it is so much appreciated.

Appendix L: Techniques used to establish Trustworthiness during the analysis of narratives guided by the six-steps of the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis	Techniques Establishing Trustworthiness
Phase 1. Familiarisation with the Data	• Prolonged engagement and exposure with the interview data- immersed in the data: reading and re-reading the transcripts. • Documentation of reflective thoughts following familiarisation with the data and identification of thoughts about potential codes/themes following readings. • Maintenance and storage of raw data in well-organised archives, with participant number identification.
Phase 2. Generating initial codes	• Reflexive journaling maintained. • Maintenance of a coding system. • Audit trail of code generation, including NVIVO maintenance. • Documentation of discussions and consultations with three-member supervisory team.
Phase 3. Generating Themes	• Diagramming conducted to make sense of theme connections. • Maintained detailed notes about the development and hierarchies of themes. • Documentation of discussions and consultations with three-member supervisory team.
Phase 4. Reviewing Potential Themes	• Themes and subthemes were reviewed and discussed with three-member supervisory team. • Returned to the raw data for referential adequacy.
Phase 5. Defining and Naming Themes	• Documentation of discussions and consultation with three-member supervisory team. • Documentation of theme naming and definition.

Phase 6. Producing the Report	• Engagement with the Reference Group • Description of the coding and analysis in sufficient details within the Methodology Chapter and as evidenced by appendices (See Appendix P) re: coding. • Thick descriptions have been provided in the overall findings chapter; Chapter Four and Chapter Five, ensuring the voice of the women is heard and that reflect the generated themes. • Description of the audit trail is provided within the Methodology and in the Appendix. • A report on the reasons and justifications for choosing the theoretical framework, the methodology and research design, as well as the data analysis methods have been clearly outlined in the Methodology Chapter; Chapter 3, as well as choices made throughout the research process. • A section based on the trustworthiness of the study is also presented in the Methodology Chapter. • The Discussion chapter returned to the original theoretical literature used to inform the study, as well as other literature that supported my argument as the researcher. The findings were contrasted with the broader literature and how the findings added to the current body of knowledge are provided in the discussion and conclusion chapter (Chapter Six). • In the write up of the Methodology and Findings chapters, I, as the researcher have utilised the Guidelines for reviewers and editors evaluating thematic analysis manuscripts, produced by Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun (2023) to support me in ensuring that the write-up of the PhD dissertation demonstrates quality in reflexive thematic analysis across Study One, Two and Study Three.

Appendix M: The Researcher's Reflexive Journey

"I want to share some of my reflections on the research process. As with all research, it is non-linear and takes a path of windy turns and roads, bringing with it great emotion and challenges. I, like many other researchers, have experienced my fair share of sentiments and significant hurdles and tests across this Ph.D. journey and have gone on a discovery, as this research process has evolved and how I, as the researcher have questioned, reflected, and changed perspectives along this journey."

Extract from Reflective Journal 22nd December 2023

In my reflexive journey of the research process, I will reflect on three key areas: the *Narrative Research Process*, *The Context of Work* and *Moving Forward*.

Reflection on the Narrative Research Process

I, as a qualitative researcher, engaged in this research accepting that I had the potential to influence this research, not only about who this study is gathering perspectives of; autistic graduate women but also about the research method and the interpretation of the data collected via interviews with the twelve women (Finlay, 2002). Therefore, the project for me, as the researcher was the need to evaluate the ways in which intersubjective elements could transform the research. At the outset of the study, I utilised my journal as a method to provide the opportunity to put my thoughts, on paper. This enabled me to bring to light and my awareness my motivations, values, assumptions, and concerns about the research. It also forced me to think about my role in the research process and in the construction of the Ph.D. thesis and this provided transparency in my inner thoughts, as well as considering the potential 'messiness' of qualitative research.

My personal and professional background, as an occupational therapist, as outlined at the outset of this thesis shaped my interest in the research topic, the research questions, and the entire research process itself. This stemmed from the fact that I had developed a service for disabled students in transition to employment and researched their

perspectives in relation to managing this transition (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017). This certainly channelled my energies into establishing the research topic and highlighting the focus on the voices of graduate autistic women. This critical self-reflexivity at the outset of the project made me consider both the positive aspects that I could contribute towards this research, but also the gaps in my ability and potential disadvantages. Given the fact that I had worked with the autistic university community, and I was involved in autism organisations, I could be considered what is termed an 'insider researcher' (Drake, 2010). Despite the fact that I am a non-autistic researcher, I considered this as being both a potential advantage and disadvantage in the study, as evidenced below from my reflective journal:

"Positives:

- *Have some background having worked with graduate autistic women- This may help to support me in developing a rapport with the women, in terms of my communication and my rapport building capacity.*
- *Support me in accessing the sample population, as I have worked with the autistic community for several years.*
- *I have conducted other qualitative research in the past; my undergraduate degree thesis and my masters by research thesis, which employed qualitative methods. This may support me with conducting the interviews and support me in the process of data analysis.*

Negatives:

- *I am a non-autistic researcher and therefore lack the lived experience. This may also impact on whether the women will wish to participate and therefore impact on recruitment.*
- *I am an occupational therapist and therefore having worked with the community, I can bring assumptions that may shape how I conduct the interviews and guide the study. But on the other hand, I also see this as a potential positive as I aim to try and find a methodology that will support hearing the voices of the women."*

Extract from Reflective Journal September 2017

As a result, of this professional background, I tried to adopt an 'eyes wide open' approach to the study, attempting to draw on approaches that had previously worked in supporting the autistic community. Furthermore, I was aware of the research, the literature, and policy and legislation related to the area of work, and I could draw on this for the study. However,

I was also cognisant of hearing the perspectives of autistic women about the potential study. As a result, I started to have several conversations with members of the autistic community about the potential plan for the study and, what was most interesting and intriguing was the fact that this was received with positive sentiment, with an expression of a favourable perspective.

“People seem to think that the study is plausible and worthy of conducting... interesting.”

Extract from Reflective Journal September 2017

I was also attending various autism conferences and events and further positivity was emerging. Yet, in the background, my concern was about the method of conducting the research, I had chosen a narrative inquiry approach having read multiple books on the methodology and having spoken with other researchers who employed this approach. I attended a talk by a fellow doctoral student one evening and having listened to her, I was excited about the prospect and the potential for using this as a methodological approach in carrying out interviews with the women, given its open nature of interviewing. Many conversations with her ensued. The narrative inquiry approach was deemed a great fit for the aim and objective of the study and in answering the potential research question. But behind it all, I was nervous and worried feeling the need to further immerse myself in the narrative approach and as a result I decided to complete a post-graduate course in narrative research with the University of East London. At the outset of the course, I identified my position in relation to narrative research:

“As an occupational therapist I truly believe that I listen to people’s narratives every day of the week. In doing so, I have the opportunity to collaboratively work with them in identifying challenges that they experience and identify ways to bring about change in their lives. Through this collaborative relationship, I am trying to make sense of the people’s lives and better understand what is meaningful and important to them.

My interest in narratives and narrative research reached its peak when I was working with a number of women with autism spectrum disorder. In meeting these women, they held their trust in me and shared their life narrative. The women wanted to be heard. Research conducted in the area of Autism is very much about

standardised testing, little literature exists in relation to the lived experiences and listening to people's voices. Even more so for women with Autism, who are often marginalised. It is for this reason that I developed an interest in using the Narrative methodologies to hear the women's voices and to embark on a journey through which their voices could be heard. My PhD uses narratives to hear the stories of these women. I have decided to undertake this course to better understand narrative methodologies and analyses and apply this in my research." (Please note: The language that I used in relation to autism has changed and this is not reflected in this email extract.)

Extract from Email Correspondence with fellow classmates and the programme coordinator October 2018

During this course, I had multiple personal tutorials and conversations with the programme coordinator; an influential academic in narrative research about narrative research and this further supported me in my justification in using narrative inquiry as the methodological approach, with the aim to hear the voices of the women whom I hoped to capture through the study. Adding to this I wanted to further upskill in conducting narrative interviews and in the single open narrative question. Consequently, I enrolled on both a two-day and three-day course with Tom Wengraf, an expert in the area of narrative research in utilising the open narrative question interviewing technique. During these courses I was both the interviewer and interviewee whereby interviews were led by single open narrative questions. This led to another path of reflection:

"As the interviewee, I feel my personality fits well with the open narrative question, I can chat at length and feel comfortable sharing information, but it makes me think could it be difficult for the women to monologue for a period of time answering the question, but likewise, I see the benefit in the use of the open question, as it fosters a real outpouring of experience and allows the opportunity to tell a story without the confines of structured questions... useful I think for my study."

Extract from Journal entries during training, London, November 2019

These experiences led me to better insights into how I could progress with the research, and I decided to conduct piloting of interview one with two women. Again, this highlighted that the women were able to share their story in whatever way they wished and although

there were other outcomes, such as the need to shorten the question, overall, it was a positive experience.

“I was comfortable with the process despite the fact that this was my first official piloting of the interview. I did find it difficult though not to be able to ask her more specific questions during the interview, but at the same time I think it allowed for her (Piloting Participant X) to share her story in whatever way she wished, and she shared so much with me, which I was really appreciative of. We seemed to have a good rapport, and this seemed to develop quickly between us and maybe this helped her share her story? Likewise, at the end of the interview she talked about how great it was and how delighted she was to be involved in the study and she explained how she really wanted to be involved in a study like this as she saw it as being valuable research. Maybe this is why she was so open in sharing? Hmm it is hard to know... I wonder though... and I am a bit concerned and feel worried was the question super-broad and therefore is the scope of the study too broad? I am wondering where do, I go from here?”

Extract from Reflective Journal December 2019

This exercise within the research process, made me question how I moved forward with the study. Although the piloting was positive, I needed to consider the further design of the study and the practical aspect of conducting the study with the autistic community. It was also at this point in the research process, that there was more research emerging within the autism literature about the research priorities of the autistic community and about conducting research. I read as much as could, considering how this literature impacted on me as the researcher and in how I conducted the study. One aspect that really stood out for me was the use of a reference group to support the further development of the study and this led me on the path to engaging with the autistic community:

“Ok, I have read loads about using reference groups to support autism studies, but I am struggling to put down exactly on paper the aims of the meetings with the Reference Group, hopefully this reflection will help me clear it up in my head.... I know in my head I want to have a conversation with them about the study design and its aims and see what they think of the proposed steps for the study. I also hope to ascertain their perspectives on whether a study such as this is warranted and whether the autistic community will actually consider a study like this to be useful? I am so conscious that there is so much research calls at the moment and what might be a good way to advertise the study, so I need to bring my recruitment pack.... I am really looking forward to hearing their thoughts and ideas about the study.”

Extract from Reflective Journal 15th December 2019

The meetings held with the members of the reference group was a significant and pivotal shift in the research process for me. Endorsing the study was a clear indication that this study was warranted and truly gave me the motivation that I needed to push forward with the study. They were truly influential in guiding the study and the impact the conversations had on me shaped the language I used to chat to the women in terms of their personal preference and identity. It really made me think about the gravitas of truly listening and hearing their story, as the members of the reference group highlighted it is not an opportunity offered to the autistic community.

“I have just had a meeting and a follow up email with one of the members of the Reference Group and I am so delighted that she endorsed the research. It was great to think that she saw this study as being “inclusive, insightful and inventive”. This is really spurring me on now to actually engage with the women who wish to participate. I plan to implement the suggestions put forward by the members of the group and to start with recruitment. I think reaching out and garnering feedback from these women was essential for me as a researcher, the conversations have allowed me to think in greater depth at the study; for example, the need to listen, consideration of how I go about building a rapport with the participants and considering how they would like to be addressed in terms of the language used. Furthermore, I have such great apprehension about the study, that the meeting now has given me some confidence in going forward with the study... now I need to get started.”

Extract from Reflective Journal 10th January 2020

In addition to the reference group, I sought to hear the experience of the women who were participating in the study, and this helped to hear their feedback, in particular in conducting the first initial, interviews:

“Garnering the feedback and thoughts of the women is so important to me as the researcher conducting the study, as I wonder and ponder over whether the research method that I am employing is either, time-consuming? Ineffective? Useful? Interesting? questioning a whole host of factors... but initial feedback is so far, positive.”

Extract from Reflective Journal 27th February 2020

Another crucial turning point in the research process was the onset of the pandemic in early March 2020, this turned the research plan on its head and had a significant relevance and impact on the study as it progressed into the future. The study moved from conducting face-to-face interviews to conducting the interviews online, and this brought its own additional stressors, at the time, I started asking myself questions:

“How am I going to be able to do the study? I need to change my research ethics application to move the study interviews online. But my big worry is whether this will impact on recruitment?... actually, how the women will find being interviewed online without actually meeting me in person, it doesn’t necessarily sit well with me, but from my reading and the conversation with other students this seems to be the way to progress. I am going to have to readily upskill and set up a space that I can conduct the interviews confidentially. So much to process and manage... I have a baby at home and no access to childcare, this is going to be a balancing act.”

Extract from Reflective Journal March 2020

Undertaking this Ph.D. study during the Covid-19 pandemic, while simultaneously working as a Practice Education Placement Coordinator for Occupational Therapy students in a university, and holding caring responsibilities for my child, with another child on the way, did undoubtedly impact on me as the researcher. I was balancing and juggling. However, these challenges faced became just an additional factor to manage along this research journey, and I embraced the challenge and set about further recruitment. What was so interesting was that the move to online interviews paved the way for more women contacting me and wanting to get involved:

“I am really excited and delighted to see that more and more women are contacting me who are interested in participating in the study. Initially I was really worried as the number were low but using the social media pages seems to be working and I am delighted that I have gone down this route based on the informant’s advice. This really is paving the way for a bigger sample of participants, which is really promising for the study. I am humbled that the women want to get involved and also how delighted that they are to see autism research exploring women’s lives.”

Extract from Reflective Journal 1st April 2020

The data collection phase was truly eye opening, at the outset of the study I was worried that the women would find the single open narrative question troubling based on my own reflections, but what ensued was quite different:

“Something that has really struck me is the length at which the women are narrating their stories, following the prompt of the open-ended narrative question. I remember in the training, Tom Wengraf suggested that people generally speak from anything from 10 minutes to about 20 minutes. It appears that the women are speaking on average much longer than this. I would think then that this open-ended question is obviously working for the women, they seem to be sharing their work story and it appears free flowing, which is great. It’ll be interesting getting some more feedback on this from the women at the end of interview two.”

Extract from Reflective Journal 1st April 2020

Rich description of experience was evident across the first interview, there was no agenda, unlike my clinical experience of working with autistic women, which was confined to a one-hour session, although I actively listened there was a plan to support, and this open narrative interview was different from my past experiences. It was refreshing, the voice of the women was really permeating through their stories, and I was simply the listener and probing for more experience in the second section of the first interview. The time between interview one and interview two, allowed me to truly reflect on the women’s stories presented in the first interview:

“The really strong narrative evident in the first interview shows that this open ended and internal questioning has been useful in asking the first three women to share their stories, it will certainly be a huge element in interview two with these women, but I need to see what areas I need to focus on by reviewing their transcripts for the second interview and discussing this with my supervisors.”

Extract from Reflective Journal 18 March 2020

Similarly, the literature also informed me at this stage of preliminary analysis in devising a format for the second interview. What was present in the women’s stories was a clear sense of barriers and this got me thinking:

“What is really striking for me as the researcher is the multitude of barriers that the women are highlighting with regard to managing work, they are mentioning, themselves and their perceptions, feeling different, other people’s perceptions,

aspects of the environment, the work itself and being overwhelmed, yet the women are actually in work and are employed. This also coincides with the literature which didn't paint a great picture in terms of autistic women working. Most of the literature highlighted the actual challenges and barriers of work. Many of the women have significantly highlighted this thus far in the interviews. I think in the second interview I need to try and tease out what is/isn't supporting the women in work."

Extract from Reflective Journal 25th March 2020

The stories shared by the women in the first and second interviews were very powerful, their level of openness and honesty was overwhelming, to the point that I was truly exhausted at the end of the interviews with each of the women, likewise the women also reported that they were exhausted. However, this also made me consider these feelings in the context of being the researcher. This marked a pivotal moment in the study as I transitioned from being the one privileged to hear the women's stories, being the 'recipient', to now taking on the active role as the 'provider' with the responsibility to share the women's stories as a collective as an outcome of the study, with experiencing a sizeable weight and significant responsibility in representing these women's stories.

"Gosh, I am feeling the weight of representing the women...the voice of the women needs to come through and I need to share this...."

Extract from Reflective Journal September 2020

Within the "messy, muddy place" of data analysis, whereby I ventured "down rabbit holes" "looking beyond what I already know" and "trying to process" (Extract from Journal 11th September 2020) and take the advice from my supervisors "to immerse myself in the data" (Extract from Journal 20th November 2020), I analysed and re-analysed the women's transcripts multiple times to truly try and understand the women's stories and their perspectives. My office walls were covered with sticky notes and visual maps to support me with the data analysis process and to support reflexivity. The data analysis process took place over an extended period of time, and I engaged frequently with my supervisors discussing the themes that I had identified, as well as writing when I was actively moving through the six phases of the analysis process. I reflected by developing my story of some of the themes and this supported me as I conducted the data analysis phase.

“This is about the women where they're feeling different. There is a sense of feeling different, feeling difference, they feel different because they've had past experiences which have made them feel somewhat different. This happened in school, or they felt it themselves, whereby they acted a certain way, and it didn't actually go well. They didn't know or have a way of understanding that they were autistic, so some got a diagnosis. This acted for some as a reason for why they struggled in the past. They also consider this negative sense of self, they see themselves as the problem, so they've never really fitted it and so there's this whole, sense of trying to act normal by trying to fit in. So maybe the fit, fit, feeling different is never fitting in so it's like the women are having difficulties. So in the past basically the women have had these experiences of negative experiences they then develop this in internalized negative sense of self, they label themselves like they don't belong, their weird, they identify as being odd they feel that they're stalling in life and they don't seem to trust themselves there's something there by themselves that they don't like and they're struggling with where they stand with themselves as a result of this they tried to push themselves out of their own comfort zone and push themselves to do better as individuals in work.”

Extract from Reflective Journal December 2021

The final review of the themes was sent to my supervisors and the feedback garnered supported me to conduct another analysis of the themes by further reflecting on my reflections and the stories shared by the women. Returning and revisiting the reference group members for a discussion on the findings provided a fresh and perspective to the study, as the themes central to the findings of the study resonated with these autistic women and their personal and individual work journeys and trajectories.

The Context of Work

At the outset of this study, I identified work as being an incredibly important facet of my life and perceived it to also be important in the lives of others. Based on these assumptions, I considered work to be a marker of adulthood, a time in which one moves from either secondary or higher-level education into employment. Considering this I perceived how a new world may open, with a sense of independence, financial independence, a new identity, and status, a sense of fulfilment and achievement, as well as potentially bringing with it an opportunity for exciting new adventures. In my view, work is generally seen as

conferring a social status within society, and in Irish culture, there exists a particular expectation that individuals will participate in employment. This expectation was certainly ingrained in my family context, and it is with this background that my assumptions were held at the outset of the study. Yet, what proved revolutionary for me throughout this research process was the profound shift in my viewpoint in relation to the concept of work.

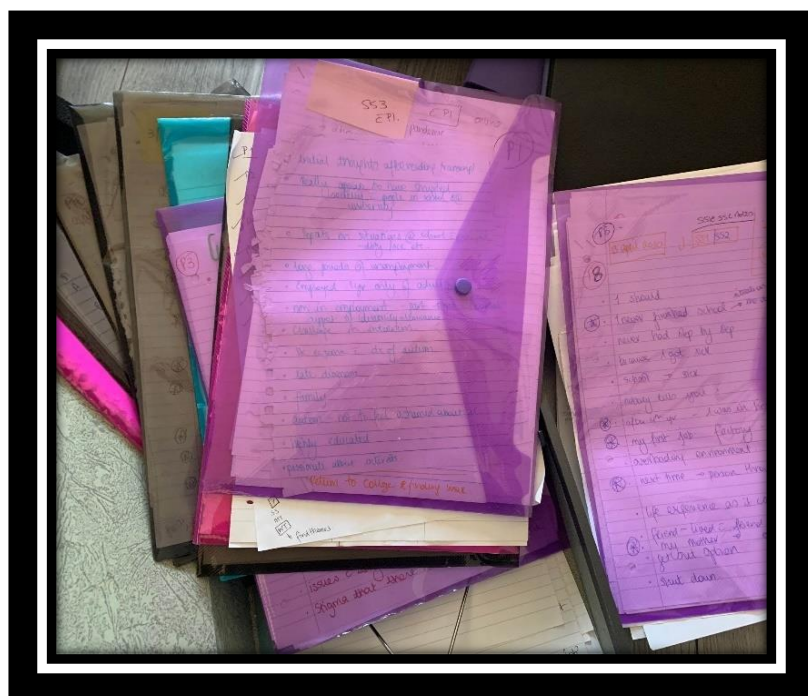
Conducting this study alongside a full-time job within a university, together with having a young family led me to re-evaluate my initial assumptions and perspectives of work. The world of work is an arena which requires constant navigation, also evident from the findings of this study. In navigating work, I am required to consider what influences and impacts on this navigation and at the forefront is my role and 'job' as a mother. This brings with it a new set of priorities, which must be managed and negotiated. Within this context, I started to consider many of the aspects that the women shared in their narratives and in considering the findings from these narratives, which highlighted how many of the women were navigating work, with its various demands and expectations. Furthermore, the women identified how the environment and the work systems required navigation, often coming at a cost to the women. In considering this and being immersed within these narratives, despite, not identifying as autistic, I contemplated the intricacies of my own working world and the balancing act between work and additional responsibilities. This prompted me to reassess and re-evaluate the support systems that I deem necessary to enable me to navigate this working world. In the initial stages of the study, work held considerable importance. Nevertheless, this journey has prompted a re-evaluation, emphasizing aspects of my life that I now deem more crucial and deserving of priority. This includes maintaining and committing myself within my professional role that accommodates these newfound perspectives.

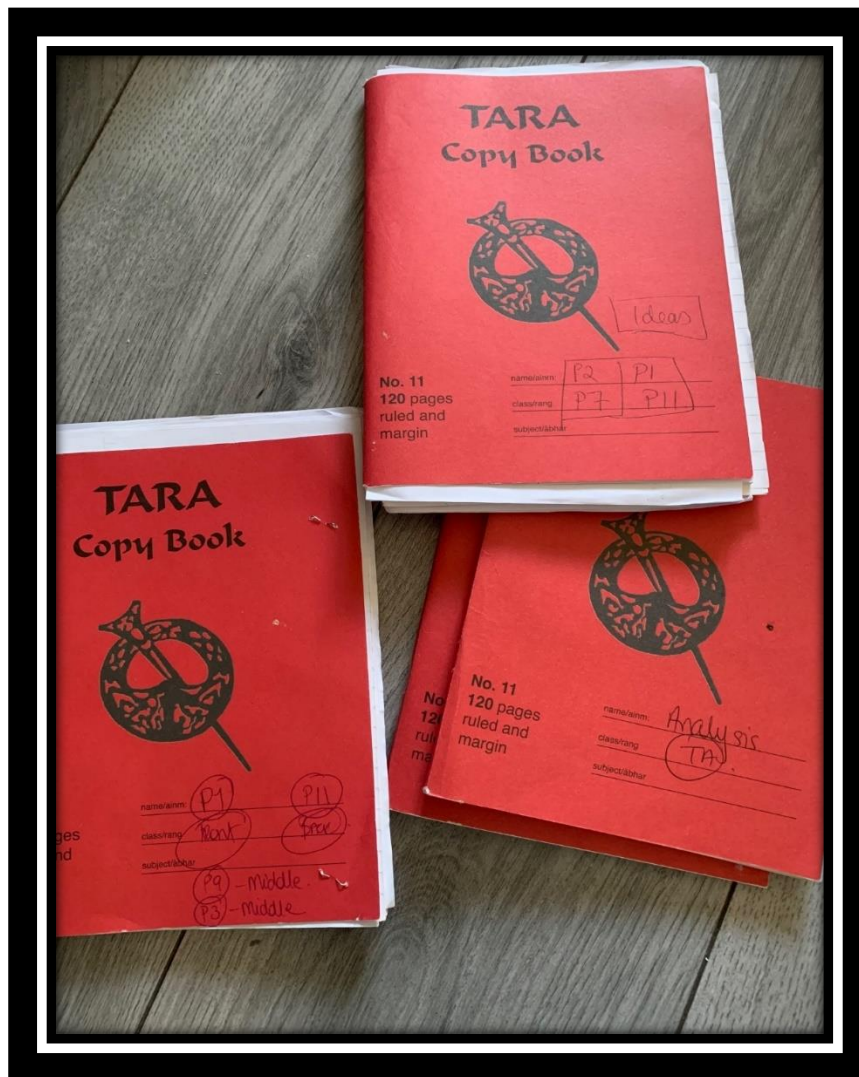
Moving Forward

I began this research journey as an occupational therapist working in a disability service within a university, and in my work, I employed the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990), combined with the theoretical constructs of a person-centered, occupation-based

perspective. Coming from this stance, enabled me to work closely and collaboratively with the autistic community both within and outside of the university in developing initiatives that supported autistic individuals throughout their university journey. Working within this unique role, offered many of these opportunities that differed from working in clinical based services. Yet, in my engagement with other occupational therapists through continuous professional study days, engagement in committees and organisations and in attending conferences, it was apparent that many of them were employing a medical model perspective in their work with autistic individuals. Given my background and experiences, this viewpoint clashed and contradicted my perspective. At the time, there was an initial drive and a movement within the Irish autistic community towards the neurodiversity framework and perspective, and the request from the autistic community for practitioners including, occupational therapists to employ this perspective in their practice. Having the opportunity to meet these twelve women and hear their stories, who I owe significant gratitude to, as well as through my engagement with the literature and the wider autistic community and this overall research study, it has only strengthened and underscored my dedication to persist in supporting the autistic community as a non-autistic ally. As I am ending this Ph.D. journey engaged in the academic sphere, teaching the next generation of occupational therapists, I am even more committed to advocating for a shift in the narrative and balance of power to the experts themselves, autistic individuals. I will be championing the necessity for employing a neurodiversity perspective and lens in supporting autistic individuals and in conducting research, where both practice and research should not operate in isolation.

Appendix N: Evidence of Researcher Reflexivity Maintained through Reflective Journals





Appendix O: Duration of the Participant Interviews

Participant	Interview 1: Part One	Interview 1: Part Two	Interview 2	Total Length of Interviewing across Interview 1 and Interview 2
Sally	40 minutes	1 hour	1 hour 17 mins 7 seconds	2 hours 57 minutes 7 seconds
Judith	41 minutes 6 seconds	1 hour	2 hours 3 minutes 17 seconds	3 hours 44 minutes 23 seconds
Grace	36 minutes 44 seconds	1 hour 5 minutes	3 hours 30 minutes	5 hours 11 minutes 44 seconds
Jenny	42 minutes 48 seconds	1 hour 2 minutes 52 seconds	2 hours 2 minutes 46 seconds	3 hours 48 minutes 26 seconds
Angela	38 minutes 40 seconds	1 hour 9 minutes 14 seconds	2 hours 51 minutes	4 hours 38 minutes 54 seconds
Leah	1 hour 22 minutes 53 seconds	46 minutes 39 seconds	3 hours 20 minutes	5 hours 29 minutes 32 seconds
Martha	22 minutes	1 hour	1 hour 48 minutes 23 seconds	3 hours 10 minutes 23 seconds
Alex	38 minutes 36 seconds	1 hour 4 mins 5 seconds	3 hours 7 minutes	4 hours 49 minutes 41 seconds
Brid	21 minutes 59 seconds	49 minutes 26 seconds	3 hours 29 seconds	4 hours 11 minutes 54 seconds
Martina	24 minutes 16 seconds	52 minutes 55 seconds	2 hours 50 minutes	4 hours 7 minutes 11 seconds
Ciara	31 minutes 6 seconds	1 hour 23 minutes 1 second	2 hours 51 minutes	4 hours 45 minutes 7 seconds
Sarah	1 hour 1 minute 21 seconds	29 minutes 31 seconds	2 hours 15minutes	3 hours 45 minutes 52 seconds

Appendix P: Codebook depicting the Braun and Clarke (2022) Six-Phase Approach used to guide the analysis of narratives of Interview One (Study One), Interview Two (Study Two) and feedback from the participants of their participation in the research (Study Three)

Table 1. Braun and Clarke (2022) Six-Phase Approach used to guide the analysis of narratives for Study One, Study Two and Study Three

Phase	Title	Description
One	Familiarisation with the Data	• Accuracy checks conducted of the transcribed transcripts took place. • Management of the interviews, where the interviews were separately read identifying; Study One, Study Two and Study Three. • Reading and re-reading of the data for each study took place, noting initial ideas and thoughts. • Interview transcripts from Interview One and Interview Two were imported into NVIVO.
Two	Generating initial codes	• Initial and systematic coding of the interviews to de-construct the data from its original chronology into initial non-hierarchical general codes took place. • Codes were assigned clear definitions.
Three	Generating Themes	• The coded data was reviewed and analysed to identify codes that could be combined according to shared meanings so that they may form themes or sub-themes. • Collation of data relevant to potential themes identified.
Four	Reviewing Potential Themes	• The candidate themes generated in phase three were reviewed and refined in relation to the coded data items and the entire dataset at level one and level two.
Five	Defining and Naming Themes	• A detailed analysis of each of the themes was presented for each study; Study One, Study Two and Study Three.
Six	Producing the Report	• This involved writing the report in the form of the thesis that tells the story of the data and that ensures the nuanced aspects, while answering the research question. • The provision of robust evidence in the form of short and longer quotes and extracts from the data to provide evidence for the final analysis, as presented in Study One, Study Two and Study Three which are presented in chapter four and five.

Table 2. Generating codes and themes

Study:	Phase Two - Generating initial codes	Phase Three - Generating Themes	Phase Four - Reviewing Potential Themes	Phase Five - Defining and Naming Themes
Study One	934 codes generated	44 combined coded categories	4 potential themes	4 Themes defined with sub-themes
Study Two	729 codes generated	49 combined coded categories	6 potential themes	4 Themes from Study One confirmed 2 Themes defined with sub-themes
Study Three	25 codes generated	1 combined coded category	1 potential theme	1 Theme defined with sub-themes

Table 3. An example of the codes and themes generated across the phases

	Phase Two - Generating initial codes (Example of Codes)	Phase Three - Generating Themes (Example of Coded Category)	Phase Four - Reviewing Potential Themes (Example of Potential Theme)	Phase Five - Defining and Naming Themes (Example of Theme)
Study One	-Comparison to 'average' person' -Sensitive to many things that don't affect others -Is it autism or not?	Comparison of self to others with regard to work	Sense of self influences their work experiences and permeates through their work journey	Theme: Perceptions of Difference Sub-Theme: Feeling Different
Study Two	-Attention to detail -Strength is being creative -Good and bad at some things -Intelligent	Strengths associated with working role	What is Success in the Workplace?	Theme: Experiencing Success at Work Sub-Theme: A Good Fit
Study Three	-Cathartic -Good to take part -Not a story get to tell very often	Research Participation	Thoughts on the Research	Theme: The Women's Perspectives on the Research Sub-Theme: Participant Benefits

Phase One: Evidence of Data Familiarisation Phase

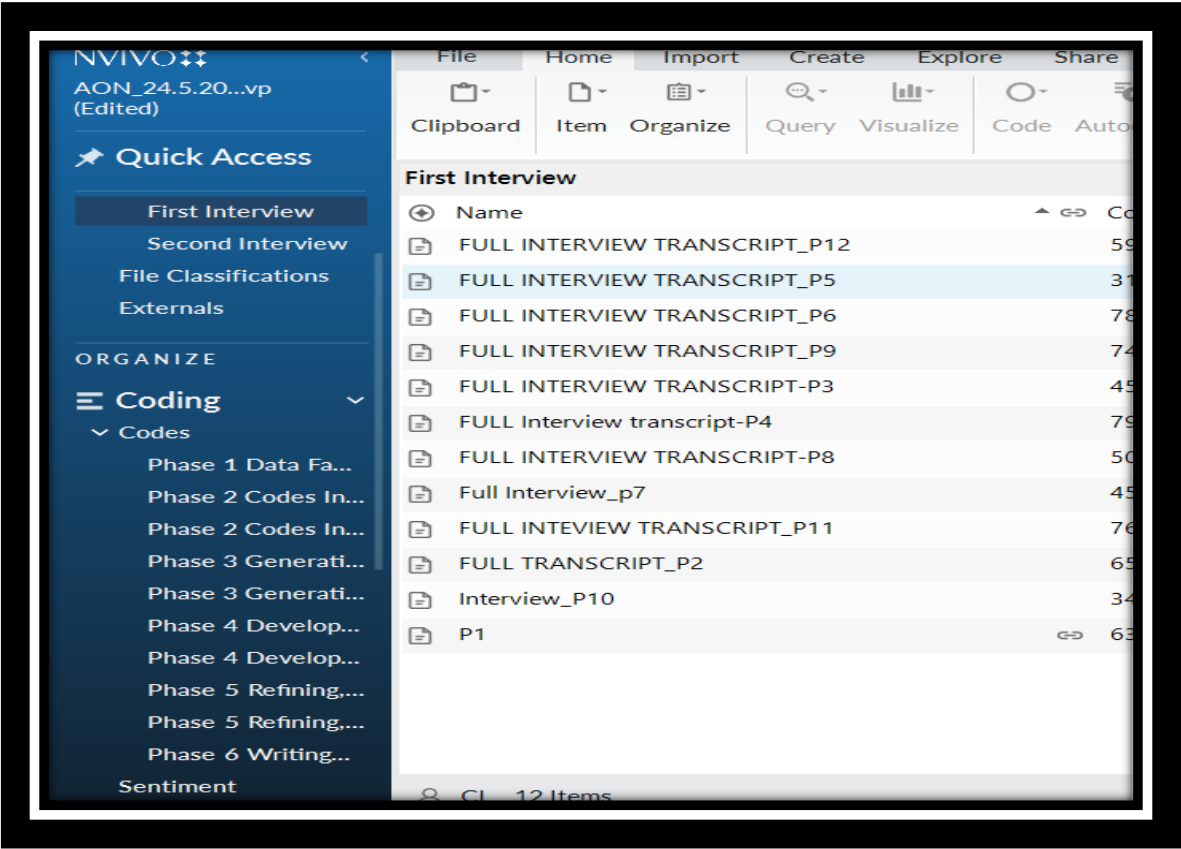


Photo 1. Evidence of Interview One uploaded to NVIVO

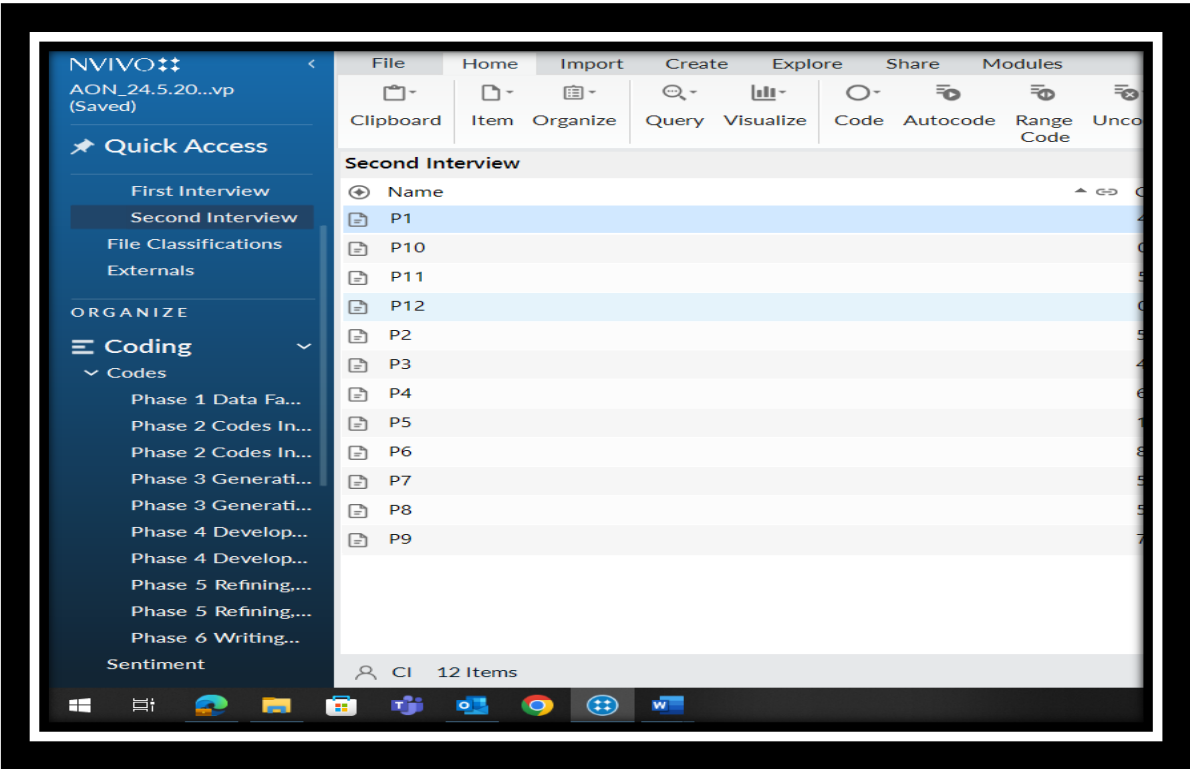


Photo 2. Evidence of Interview Two uploaded to NVIVO

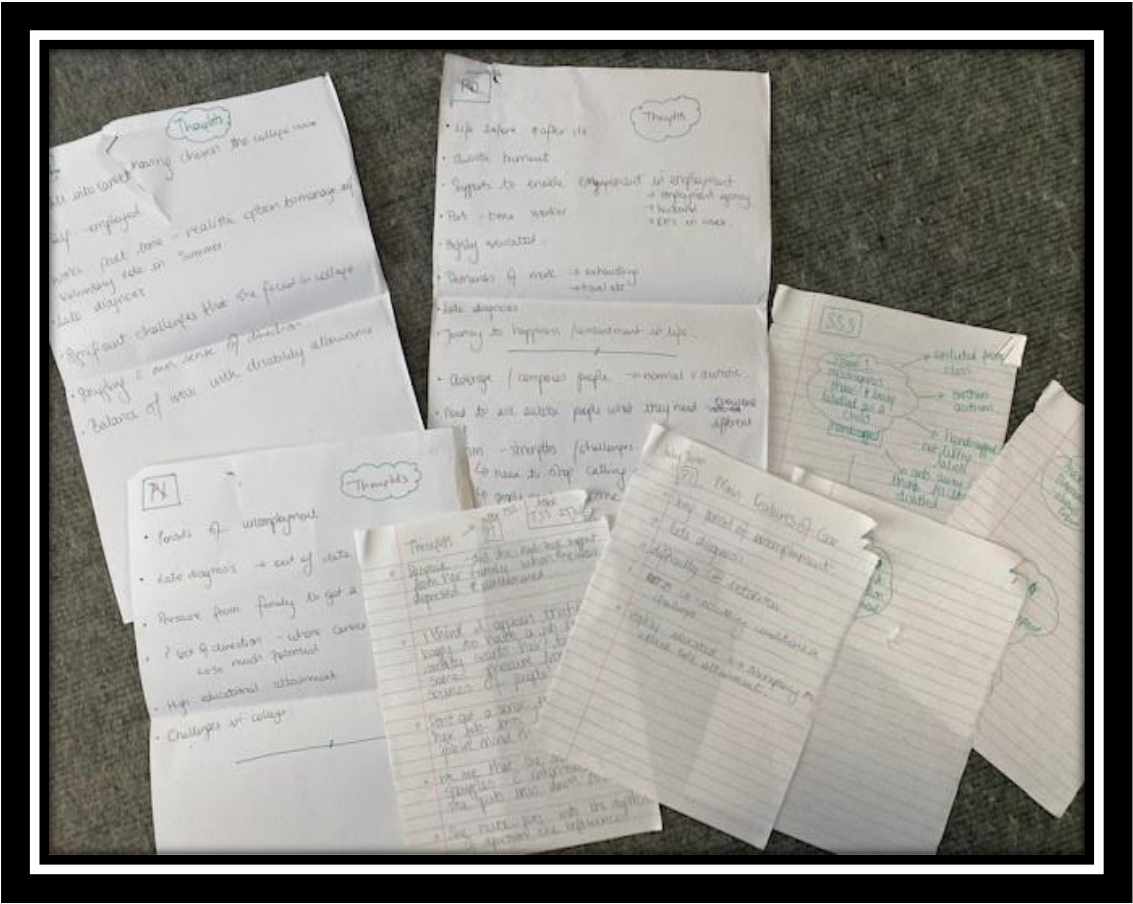


Photo 3. Evidence of noting initial ideas and thoughts

Phase Two: Evidence of Generating Initial Codes

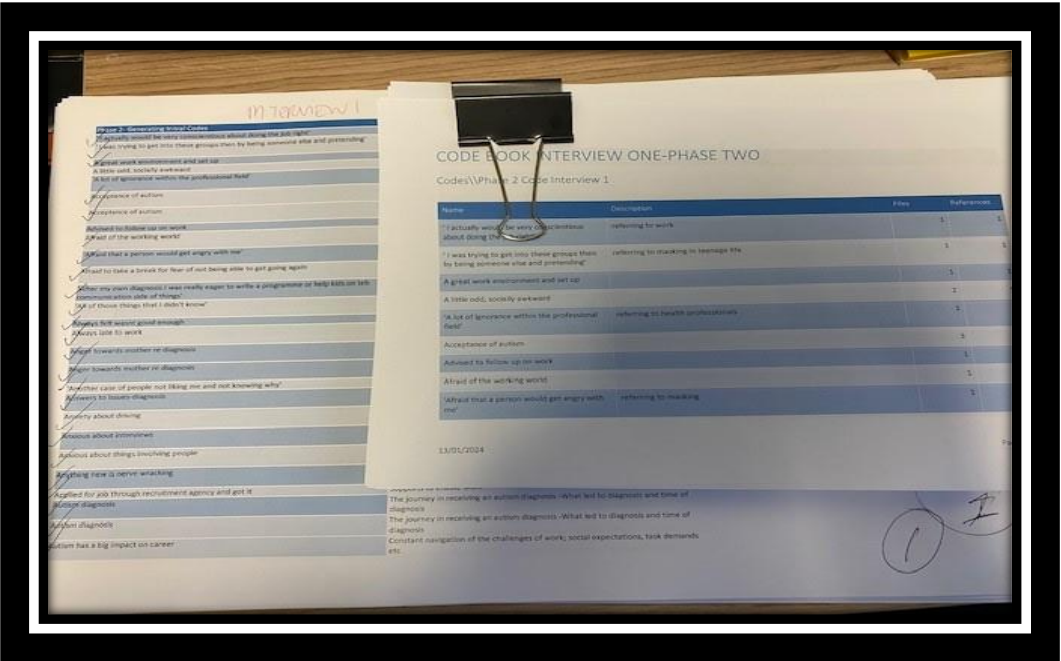


Photo 4. Evidence of Codebook generated from Phase Two, Study One

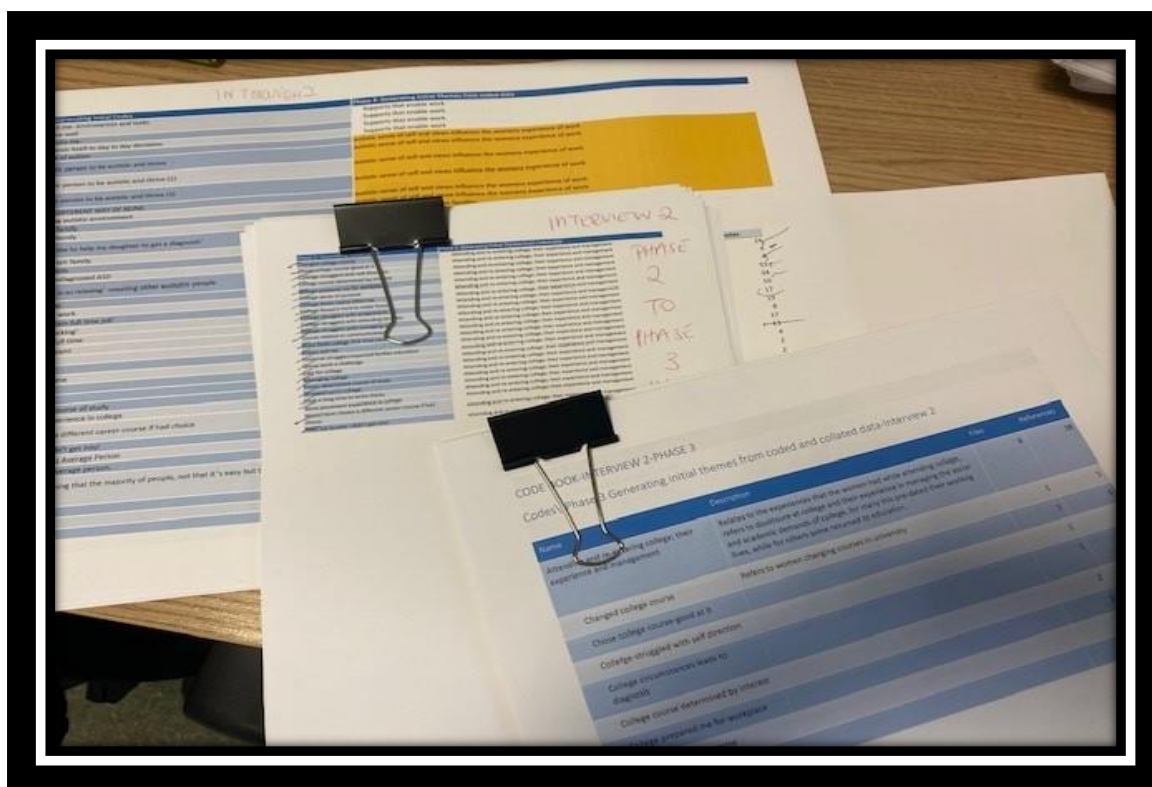


Photo 7. Evidence of Codebook generated from Phase Three, Study Two

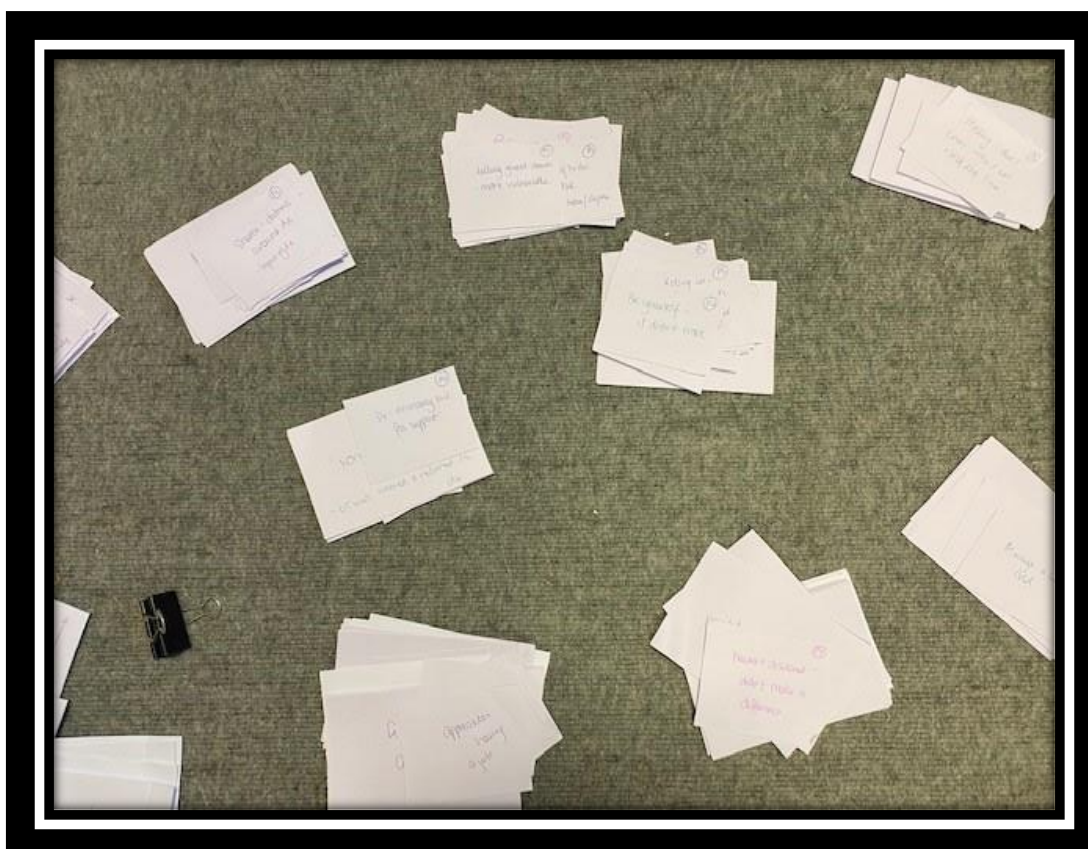


Photo 8. Evidence of grouping the codes with postcards

Phase Four: Evidence of Reviewing Potential Themes

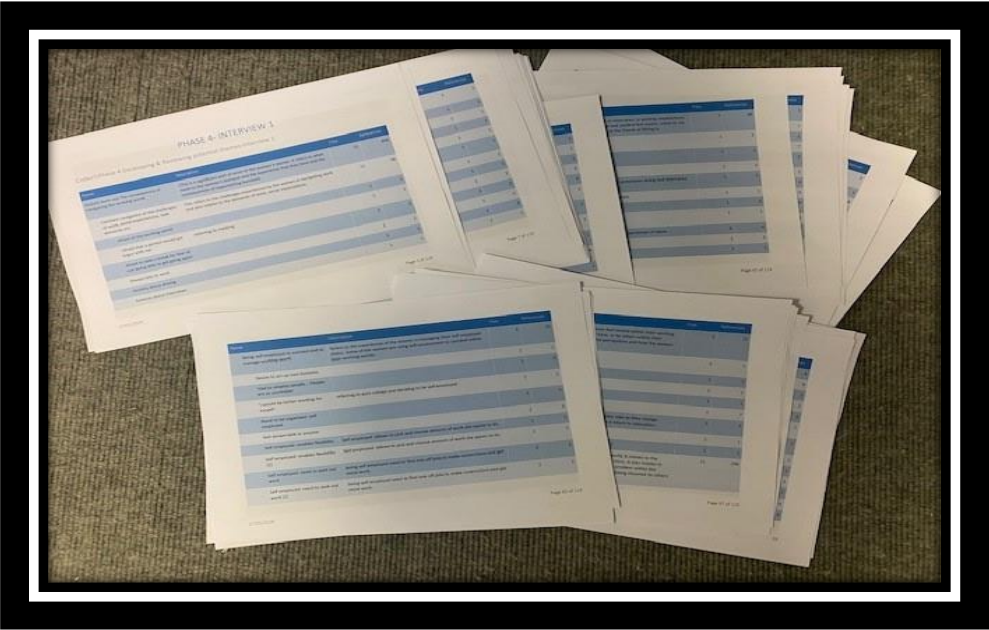


Photo 9. Evidence of Reviewing Potential Themes, Study One

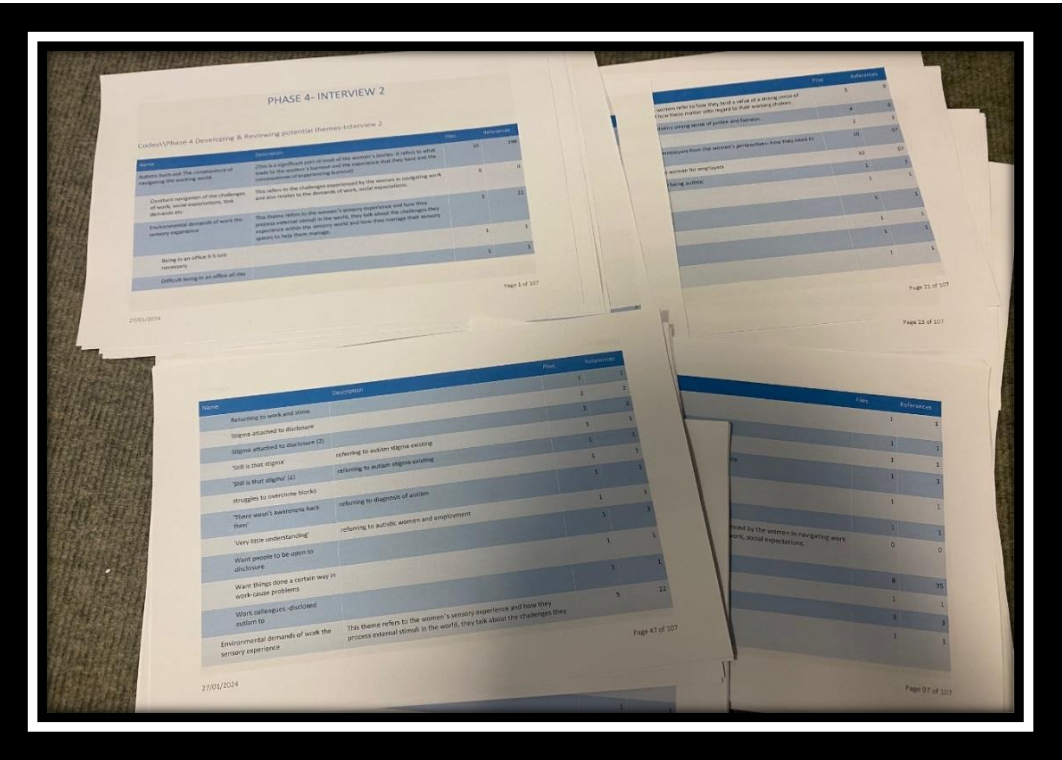


Photo 10. Evidence of Reviewing Potential Themes, Study Two

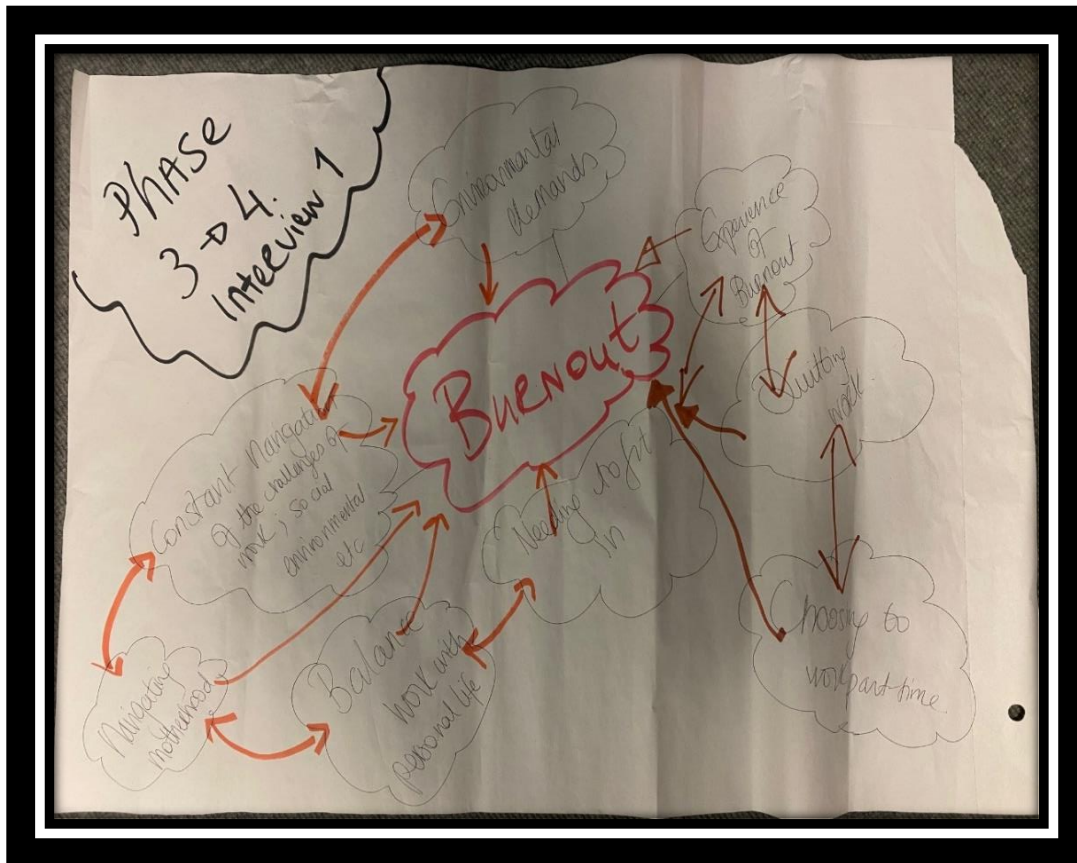


Photo 11. Visual of Reviewing Potential Themes, Study One

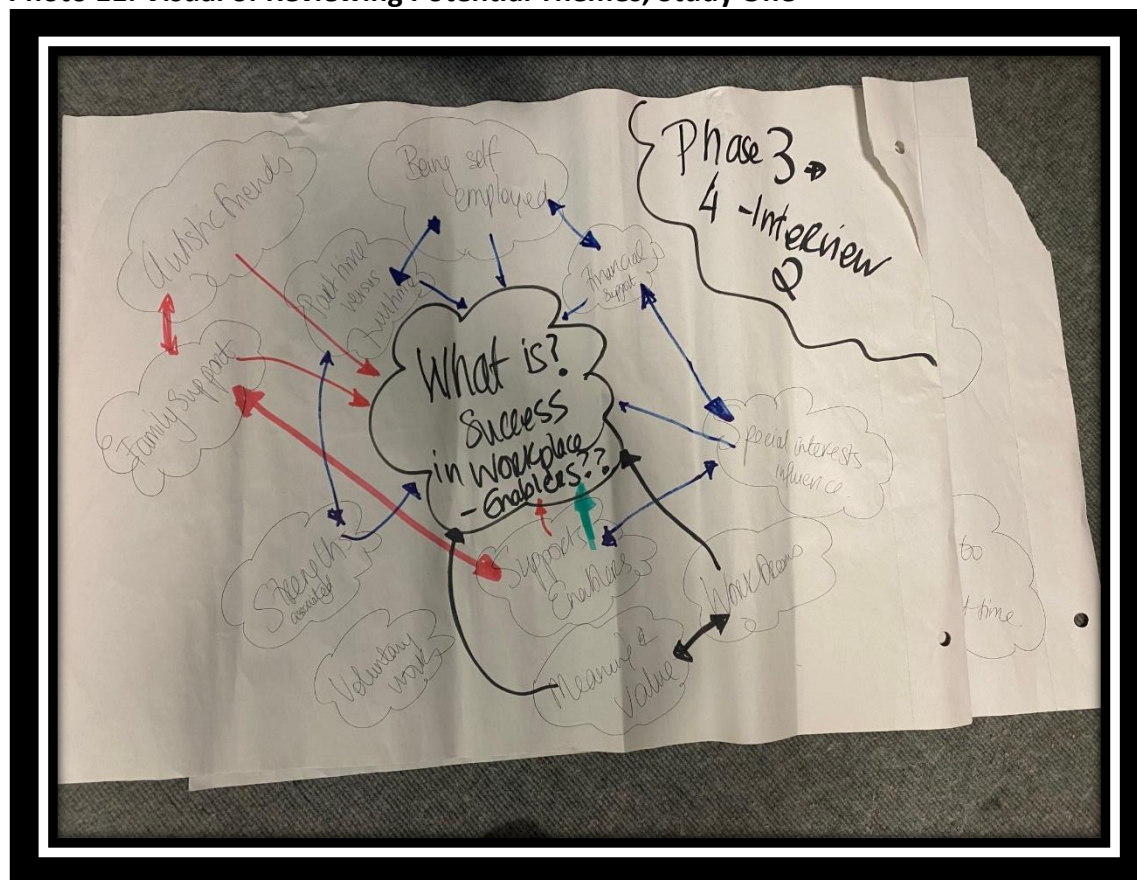


Photo 12. Visual of Reviewing Potential Themes, Study Two

Phase Five: Evidence of Defining and Naming Themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022) Interview One (Study One)

Phase – 5- Interview 1 – Study One Themes and Sub-Themes	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (Rules for Inclusion)	Example of a Segment of Text from Study One
Theme 1. Work Journeys	This accounts for the different journeys that the women took across their working lives and the influences on these journeys.	<i>"I haven't worked full-time very much in my life."</i> (Sarah).
Sub-theme 1.1. Educational Paths	This accounts for the women's experiences of higher education and details the notable pattern of the women's return to education across their working journeys and their rationale for these decisions.	<i>"I wanted to get into a job with more 'technical aspects' type stuff. And that's a hell of a lot easier to do with a qualification in the right area. People do go from the area of maths straight into 'technical' jobs, but it really helps if you've got an actual 'technical course'."</i> (Judith).
Sub-theme 1.2. Disjunction of educational attainment and employment status	This accounts for the disjunction of and misalignment of the women's employment status and their level of education and qualifications, indicating underemployment.	<i>"I've been underemployed I think as well because I have two first class honours degrees, but I still have minimum wage jobs."</i> (Jenny).
Sub-theme 1.3. Chequered Work History	This accounts for the work histories of the women which were patterned with histories and experiences of unemployment, frequent job changes, short-term employment, and instability across their working history.	<i>"If you look at my CV... it's a patchwork. It's a lot of different things.... I'm a bit of a patchwork kind of person and I found employers, they look at your CV and they give you weird look, because of course they want stability... I've got some sneers also when I went to an interview, like what does your CV look like?"</i> (Jenny).
Sub-theme 1.4. Career Progression	This accounts for the women's experiences in their attempts to develop a career and the challenges that they encounter.	<i>"So, after college I wasn't sure what I was going to do."</i> (Ciara).

		<i>"I feel lost. And sometimes I just think that... When I look back at why and where these gaps are, they can all come from being out of step with... I'm out of step." (Angela).</i>
Theme 2. Perceptions of Difference	This accounts for the women's subjective experience of their sense of self and their distinct feeling of difference from others. It describes their perceived perceptions of others and the impact that this has on their sense of self and ultimately on their work experiences. In attempt to understand their sense of self and feeling different the women sought a diagnosis and this impacts on the women and their subsequent work experiences.	<i>"Between the ages of maybe 12 and 17, maybe earlier, I'm not sure but I would have like become super aware of being different." (Alex).</i>
Sub-theme 2.1. Feeling Different	This relates to how the women feel different from others. The impact of feeling different and never fitting in within the workplace has permeated from childhood into their working lives. It further refers to how the women compared themselves to others and how they developed an internalised sense of difference which impacted on them personally.	<i>"This kind of feeling alien from people. Like I find it hard to make connections with many people, or deeper connections.... I often feel like I don't belong in any group." (Jenny).</i>
Sub-theme 2.2. Perceptions of Others	This refers to the women's perceptions of how others perceived and treated them.	<i>"It mightn't be people actually saying stuff to you, but it might just be you pick up on people not being comfortable around you or just treating you different to other people." (Martina).</i>
Sub-theme 2.3. Seeking an Answer and Impact of Diagnosis	This relates to the women's journey in seeking an answer to their feelings of difference and the impact of their diagnosis on themselves and their working lives.	<i>"Getting a diagnosis to me – and I would say this to everyone as well, it's a necessary evil. Sometimes diagnoses are very important because it gives people the ability to have a narrative and a label, and that makes sense for their world. It wasn't like that for me. I kind of probably already knew I had autism, that wasn't the problem. I needed support in order to move forward and in Ireland getting a diagnosis is the only way you can kind of access additional supports. So, that's why I did it and that kind of moved me on slowly and steadily towards going to another course and then going to my third course and then getting into a job." (Ciara).</i>

Theme 3. Working in a Neurotypical World	This accounts for the perceived challenges and situations experienced by the women as a result of being neurodivergent in a neurotypical world. It identifies the unaccommodating aspects of the working world.	<i>"The way the world is designed, that it's not working for autistic people." (Brid)</i>
Sub-theme 3.1. The Social Demands	This refers to how work presents a variety of social demands on the women and describes situations that the women experienced in terms of misunderstandings and miscommunications which traversed all stages of work.	<i>"I do find the whole process of kind of, like processing what someone said to you, working out what they mean, working out what I react to that, working out what I think, turning that into words can sometimes be a slightly laborious process. Like I don't quite process words or people's body language or expressions quite as quickly as your average person does... It just means that I end up not saying things that I should have said, sometimes. Or being rushed into saying the wrong thing." (Judith).</i>
Sub-theme 3.2. The Sensory Environment	This accounts for the women's experiences of the sensory environments that they encounter in navigating their work. The women refer to the challenges of the external sensory stimuli present in their work environments that impacts on them.	<i>"The noise of kids, the chatter of kids, sometimes they would wreck my head so much that even if I'd be ages being able to start. I could not gather my thoughts with all that noise in my head... I would have to insist on a level of quiet that probably suppressed them with their natural creativity and chatting to each other because the noise was making me mad." (Brid).</i>
Sub-theme 3.3. Disclosure is complicated	This refers to the contentious decision-making process that the women endured in deciding whether to disclose their autistic identity in the workplace. It also refers to their opinions on disclosure which is influenced by the women's perceptions, their personal beliefs, societal attitudes, and past experiences.	<i>"So, when people talk about disclosing or not, I say you have to think about it long and hard and think about what's valuable to you and what you need to do." (Brid).</i>
Sub-theme 3.4. Trying to Fit in	This describes the multiple strategies that the women use to fit in with the neurotypical working world. They describe how they are adapting their behaviours, hiding themselves and taking on different personas, as well as monitoring their thoughts and actions in order to counteract their feelings of difference, to fit in, to conceal their perceived social difference and to conform to societies expectations.	<i>"Autistic people have to do that way more often than most people do.... to kind of get on in society so that they can, they can seem more 'normal'." (Judith).</i> <i>"It's society, is literally going you can't be yourselves because if we don't like it, that's just what we did to gay people. You can't be gay because straight people don't like it, so you've got</i>

		<i>to pretend. That's, we've just been doing the same thing to all these different groups, you know."</i> (Martina).
Sub-theme 3.4.1 'Learned how to socialise'	This refers to how the women made a conscious effort to study, observe, and copy others, as well as develop scripts as a mechanism to learn how to socialise, interact and engage in the working world.	<i>"For years and years and years, I was watching people, observing people, learning how to interact with people, learning by rote how social interactions work...and applying them in some sort of scientific method."</i> (Ciara).
Sub-theme 3.4.2 'Pretending to be someone else'	This refers to how the women took on a different persona or character and changed themselves in an attempt to fit in and engage in the working world.	<i>"I can put on the kind of very charming mask. You know this kind of, I like to make people laugh and I'm very good at it during interviews, and that kind of sticks with people, because most people would go in and be super nervous and then I'm not. I just... I can play this role."</i> (Jenny).
Sub-theme 3.4.3 'Monitoring'	This refers to how the women maintained a sense of vigilance to keep a check on their monitor	<i>"Like literally, every time I met somebody, and they were having a conversation, I'd be like agreeing with things I didn't think were right at all... If someone asked you something, you're kind of thinking what is the best response. Not like what do I actually want to say... So, I wouldn't actually be giving my own opinion or kind of saying what I wanted to say a lot of the time, it would have just been like, what's the best response to give in this situation to keep myself safe maybe? And to avoid confrontation or just pleasing somebody."</i> (Martina).
Theme 4. Autistic Burnout: The Consequence of Navigating the Working World	This refers to how the women are consistently managing and navigating the neurotypical working world. In trying to navigate, they experience a cumulative load of stressors which are placed on them, as well as their perceived need to fit in to society. As a result, the women are employing strategies to conceal themselves to fit in. This results in the women experiencing autistic burnout, which is characterised by a multitude of experiences, which further impacts on the women and their working lives.	<i>"I've read about autistic burnout as well. So, apparently that's a distinguished thing. I always thought, how can you be burned out? What's wrong with you? Why are you not stronger, you know? You're not even working full-time. How can you be so exhausted all the time? But maybe it's just because I'm much more sensitive to many things that don't even affect other people."</i> (Jenny).

Sub-theme 4.1. Experiences of Autistic Burnout	This accounts for the characteristics associated with the women's experience and presentation of burnout.	<i>"One day I couldn't do anything. I couldn't feed myself; I couldn't walk, I couldn't do anything. I literally couldn't lift my hand to put a fork to my mouth. My body just went, do you know what, you're not looking after me so I'm just going to do this myself and ...it was just literally like my body wouldn't or couldn't do anything that I asked of it...It was a weird kind of, it was a really weird sensation. It was really weird, to just not have any control over your body or not be able to." (Leah).</i>
Sub-theme 4.2. The Impact of Autistic Burnout	This refers to the consequences and implications on the women's working lives as a result of experiencing burnout. It encompasses the variety of consequences for the women, on their working roles and on their personal and social life.	<i>"I had a successful career as an 'role in education and training' where I was very highly regarded but I was burning out, didn't know that at the time but I was burning out and left that." (Brid).</i>

Phase Five: Evidence of Defining and Naming Themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022) Interview Two (Study Two)

Phase – 5- Interview 2 – Study 2- New Themes	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (Rules for Inclusion)	Example of a Segment of Text from Study Two
New data from Study Two confirmed the four themes identified in the Study One table above. This table presents the two new themes identified from Study Two.		
Theme 5. Experiencing Success at Work	This refers to the supports and enablers that facilitated the women to achieve success and support their engagement at work.	<i>"I like my current job... 'she's really good at this' and it was great to be recognised."</i> (Sally).
Sub-theme 5.1. A Good Job Fit	This refers to the alignment of the women's working role/ position being suited to them based on a variety of factors, including their interests, their skills, and their identity. It also refers to how the women participate in self-employment as a way to support their engagement in the labour market, as it aligns with their interests and preferred working patterns.	<i>"Turning my passion... Like it's kind of like, I get to make a living out of something that I actually love doing."</i> (Martina).
Sub-theme 5.2. Employment Support Systems and Programmes	This refers to the various different employment support programmes that the women accessed to support them in gaining and maintaining employment. It also refers to the ongoing support the women availed of to support them to maintain their working role, this was both personal support from mentors and/or financial support.	<i>"I was kind of very kind of worried about how I was going to find a job and given my struggle before and how... Yeah, what happened in my previous job, that I ended up not being able to do it at all. And yeah, the fact that there was someone there to help. I don't think... As soon as I knew they existed, I don't think I imagined doing anything else really. It was just the obvious choice...."</i> (Judith).
Sub-theme 5.3. Familial and Collegiate Support	This refers to the network of co-workers and family members who acted as a form of support to the women as they navigated work. This support network either directly supported the women with work-related matters or supported the women indirectly by facilitating their engagement in the workforce.	<i>"My manager was really very clear and a very concise communicator which was very good...I was like Jesus if I could pay for people to be as clear at communicating it would make my life so much easier. We'd have our probably daily talks, we'd just sit down and have a five-minute talk about what</i>

		<i>work was going to happen, what we were going to do and what kind of was the expected thing for the week which I found very useful. She was very aware of me, in particular. She used to keep a good eye on that. And I think that's really just very good management skills, hugely good...I think paired with a good communication style, was very, very supportive.. It supported me very significantly at the start of my work, very significantly, when I was learning the ropes, and I was frequently getting overwhelmed."</i> (Ciara).
Sub-theme 5.4. Meaning and Value of Work	This refers to the meaning and the value that the women ascribed to their work and their work identity.	<i>"I think it just gives me, or gets me a purpose for the morning, a reason to get up, to get out and to meet people. I suppose it does get very isolating at home and I like being able to say to somebody else 'I do work. I do have a job.' That, you know when I bump into someone say that I might have went to school with years ago or say a neighbour and you know that question 'What are you doing with yourself now Sally? Are you studying, working, what?' and it's nice to be able to say 'Yes, I have a job'."</i> (Sally).
Theme 6. Employers - What they should know	This refers to the advice and steps the women have for employers with regard to supporting autistic women to thrive within the workplace.	<i>"The way to improve this is really to..."</i> (Grace). <i>"A huge amount of work to be done."</i> (Leah).
Sub-theme 6.1. Better Understanding and Awareness	This refers to the need for enhanced knowledge, awareness, and acceptance of autism in the workplace and refers to approaches that can be implemented to support this.	<i>"Inform people and train staff and train managers but a lot more than it is. For example, if you have somebody who comes in in the workplace who has a disability, it makes sense to me that as part of an induction training there would be an induction training for all your staff about that specific disability to promote communication and about it, to break down taboos and misinformation, all those things. That doesn't exist."</i> (Grace).

Sub-theme 6.2. Inclusive Adaptations	This refers to the need to remove barriers within the workplace, as well as creating inclusive environments and systems that will benefit all.	<i>“Make places more inclusive without it being a big, ‘Look, we made this space for you’ you know what I mean? That it just becomes more normalised, that when you’re having a meeting you can say to people, ‘If anybody needs to step out of the room, we have a quiet space’, that that was just a normal thing, that it wasn’t a, ‘We’re doing this because you’re special.’ More that it was just normalised. That things like captions on videos were normalised. That all of the things that people, neuro-diverse people can benefit from.... these adjustments that we can make could be made for everybody and I think if those adjustments were made and there were allowances made for some people would work better.” (Leah).</i>
Sub-theme 6.3. Benefit of employing neurodivergent people	This refers to the women’s advice to employers about the benefits of employing autistic individuals within the workplace.	<i>“Advantages to an autistic brain” (Leah).</i>

Phase Five: Evidence of Defining and Naming Themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022) Study Three

Phase – 5- Study 3 Themes and Sub- themes	Code Definitions for Coding Consistency (Rules for Inclusion)	Example of a Segment of Text from Study Three
Theme 1. The Women's Perspectives on the Research	This refers to the women's insights and perspectives on their involvement in the research.	<i>"This kind of thing, this kind of research led by actually talking to autistic people." (Leah).</i>
Sub-theme 1.1. Perceptions of the Research Process	This refers to these the feedback provided by the women on the different stages and aspects of the research process.	<i>"There needs to be a lot of flexibility in autism research, you don't see in a lot of autism research. It's an everybody answers this same questionnaire and everybody you know what I mean and then you extrapolate from that. Whereas that's not giving because... it's a neurological difference it affects everybody differently. No two autistic people are going to have, and I know this is the same with everything but it's such a profound difference in that if you don't have flexibility in your research, you're going to have confirmation bias. If you're asking the questions, you're going to find that you're getting the answers that you want to have whereas this kind of flexibility is giving you... I'm not just giving you what I think you want and that does happen with other ones... so this ability to have flexibility in researching I think is a good thing... I suppose that's a really good part of it, of setting out the parameters and then kind of, they're not very, very rigid. I suppose it's about that flexibility of being like, so this worked for me." (Leah).</i>

Sub-theme 1.2. Participant Benefits	This refers to the perceived benefits identified by the women arising from their participation in the research study.	<i>“Very useful – so always good to reflect. I always do find talking to other people, let’s me crystallise my own experience as well. So, saying it out loud gives you an opportunity to actually talk about what matters to you and what’s your impression. ... It’s the benefit of actually talking to someone about something that is probably... you don’t get to talk about very often. --- I don’t get to talk at length about what I find challenging, what I find decent about work. Because not many people have the time. So, very useful in that sort of way. It’s been a very interesting experience.” (Ciara).</i>
Sub-theme 1.3. Motivations for Involvement	This refers to the reasons and rationale provided by the women for participating in the research.	<i>“People are only just realising that autistic women exist and anything that studies autistic women specifically, I go, yes, me, me, I want to help. I want to help us get noticed and get help. People have actually realised we exist and understand us and... So, yeah, if I can do anything to help that as well. That’s always good.” (Judith).</i>