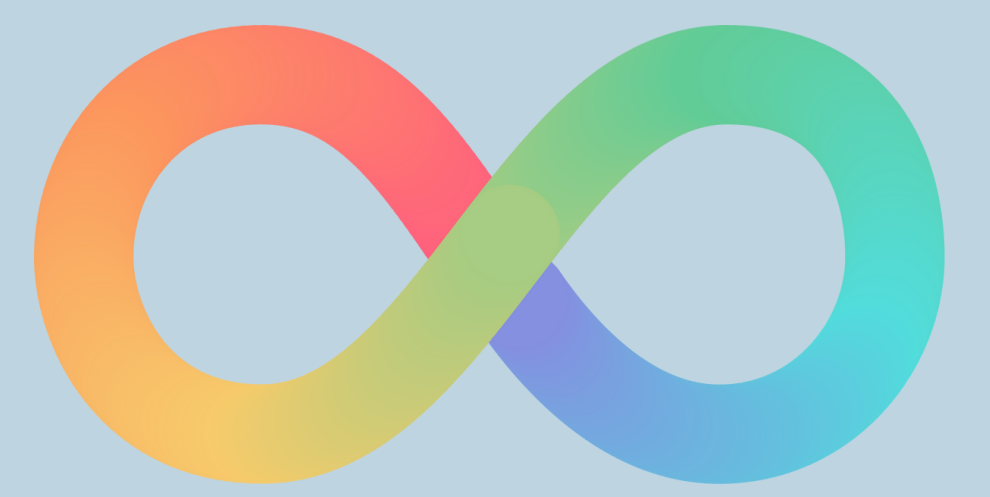


SO... NOW WHAT?

EXPLORING THE POST-DIAGNOSIS EXPERIENCES OF LATE DIAGNOSED AUTISTIC WOMEN



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INTRODUCTION

This research study explored the post-diagnostic period experiences of women with late, or adolescent, autism diagnoses. I drew on inspiration from the book *Girls and Autism: Educational, Family, and Personal Perspectives* as edited by Barry Carpenter, Francesca Happé, and Jo Egerton (2019) as well as Eleanor Bushe's (a TCD student) 2018 Master's in Education Thesis. My research question addressed a perceived gap in the literature:

How do late diagnosed autistic women recount their experiences of the period immediately following their diagnosis?

METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANT SELECTION

From my initial literature review I developed a list of central themes to help develop my interview guide. I conducted semi-structured interviews with five autistic women who had been diagnosed after the age of 15.

Participants were able to self-select to participate in this study. Trinity College Dublin's Disability Service sent out my participant information leaflet and consent form to qualifying students, who contacted me directly to participate.

All interviews were transcribed by the service Happy Scribe, and I employed thematic analysis, in line with Braun and Clarke's *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (2022).

Participants in this study were all attending university and had an average diagnostic age of 23 (one participant did not disclose their age).



ANALYSIS



THEME	SUB-THEMES	EXAMPLE QUOTATIONS
COMPARISON <i>(BENEFITS AND HARMS)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Imposter syndrome and Male Presentation of ASD b. Self-Doubt c. Benefits of autistic community 	<p><i>QUOTES:</i> 'The more I read about it and the people that were experiencing and stuff like that, the more it was actually, like that- my experience and even stuff that I thought was normal or that was the way everyone experiences things. Um, it wasn't. It was particular to this.'</p>
'CRASH AND BURN'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. 'Flying under the radar' b. Vast life changes prompting diagnosis c. Other mental health challenges 	<p><i>QUOTES:</i> [referring to brother's diagnosis] 'So he is one of those more typical cases of the young boy who isn't doing well in school, whereas because I, I suppose partly because I kind of kept my head down and just got on with my school work and was good at, kind of, academic tasks, it , I - it just, kind of, flew under the radar or whatever'</p> <p>-----</p> <p>'Like, if I could just live with it, then it's fine.' But then I s- like I wasn't able to live with it anymore. I was having like really lik-like issues that I wasn't able to kind of live with.'</p>
COMMUNICATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Boundaries b. Emotional exression c. Humanistic, or neurodivergent, approach 	<p><i>QUOTE:</i> 'I can look out for myself so much better and...navigate the world with a bit more confidence and self assurance...I feel like I have this whole like leixcon where I can accurately describe what's going on'</p>

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The three central themes identified in this study reveal the core components of the interviewees' experiences leading up to and following their autism diagnosis.

Data from the interviews indicated a need for increased contact with the autistic community for late-diagnosed autistic women, an improved understanding of women's presentation of autism societally, as well as a more considerate dialogue surrounding autism on a larger scale. Notably, participants in this study reflect a small proportion of late-diagnosed autistic women, and these results ought not to be over-generalised given the immense diversity of autistic experiences.