

“I FEEL LIKE THEY ARE ALL INTERCONNECTED” : UNDERSTANDING THE IDENTITY MANAGEMENT NARRATIVES OF AUTISTIC LGBTQ COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Research on both autistic and LGBTQ college students has uncovered themes of marginalization, selective disclosure, and efforts to build community and resist oppression. However, little work has focused on autistic LGBTQ college students and how they understand and manage their multiple identities. To address this gap, we used narrative inquiry to understand how eight college students who identified as both autistic and LGBTQ navigated higher education. We used the reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity as a framework to understand how students made sense of their identities. Our findings indicated these students prioritized salient identities based on context, managed the visibility of identities, and expressed challenges in participating in LGBTQ and/or autistic communities.

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We don't really internalize a lot of the ideas regarding gender and sexuality that are considered to be normative, at least as easily as neurotypical people would. That's why it's quite common for people to be on the autism spectrum to be, for example, agender or gender-neutral identified because they never picked up gender socialization when they were younger. They're just neutral or they don't really consider themselves to be a gendered person.

Antonio, who shared how he made meaning of his multiple marginalized identities, is just one of many college students part of both the autistic and LGBTQ communities whose voices have long been siloed or silenced. Depictions of autistic college students in the literature are both emergent and often portray autism solely as a deficit (e.g., Cox et al., 2017). Research addressing LGBTQ college students has gained momentum (e.g., Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2013; Vaccaro & Mena, 2011), and shifted away from exclusively highlighting the difficulties students face in college to acknowledging triumphs LGBTQ students experience and connections they build (e.g., Nicolazzo, 2016b). Most studies incorporating both autism and LGBTQ identities do so from a medical or biological standpoint and do not focus on college students (e.g., Dewinter, Vermeiren, Vanwesenbeeck, Lobbestael, & Van Nieuwenhuizen, 2015; Jacobs, Rachlin, Erickson-Schroth, & Janssen, 2014). Therefore, there is a need to explore how autistic LGBTQ college students understand and manage their identities.

This narrative inquiry study aimed to address one primary research question: How do autistic LGBTQ college students make meaning of their multiple social identities and how they manage and express these identities, particularly autistic and LGBTQ identities?

Relevant Literature

We drew upon research about autistic college students, LGBTQ college students, and autistic LGBTQ individuals to inform our understandings of autistic LGBTQ students and, in particular, identity management and disclosure decisions.

Autistic College Students

More autistic college students are entering higher education, particularly at two-year colleges (Snyder, de Brey, & Dilow, 2016). These students possess unique attributes, such as hyperfocus and social anxiety (Van Hees, Moyson, & Roeyers, 2015), which are occasionally heightened by co-occurrence with depression and anxiety (Hastwell, Martin, Baron-Cohen, & Harding, 2012). These attributes place a toll on autistic students who continually question their speech and engagement with others and may struggle with group work in classes (Van Hees et al., 2015). Though narratives often spotlight autistic students' academic difficulties, positive qualities like motivation, attention to detail, and observational and analytical skills can be beneficial in many classroom settings, and students' strong, narrow interests may help in bonding with peers (Van Hees et al., 2015).

While navigating college, autistic students also make sense of their own identity development. MacLeod, Lewis, and Robertson (2013) considered how autistic students interpret their self-concept; connecting with other autistic individuals may influence how students favorably perceive their autism identity. Gobbo and Shmulsky (2016) noted that institutions can promote positive identity development by both supporting efforts for autism acceptance and offering pragmatic supports (e.g., providing curricula in disability studies, bringing notable autistic figures to campus, utilizing trained peer mentors). Colleges that lack positive depictions of autism on their websites, or any content whatsoever, reinforce a narrative of autistic students as "others" (Nachman & Brown, 2020, p. 218). Through

autoethnography, Prince-Hughes (2002) illustrated how students reconcile their autistic identities in college and when interacting with peers.

Autistic students who cope with stigmatization (Cox et al., 2017) and feel misunderstood (Hastwell et al. 2012) often recognize how they are perceived by others (Cox et al., 2017). Consequently, many autistic individuals try to pass as "normal," as Cox et al. (2017) found that one student's "efforts to curb his autism-related behaviors appear to reinforce the notion that students with autism are rewarded for suppressing behaviors that come naturally with autism" (p. 81). Some students may not need to "come out" to others due to being nonverbal and typing to communicate (Ashby & Cauton-Theoharis, 2012). Others fear sharing their autism diagnoses to campus staff and peers due to potential stigmatization or rejection (Knott & Taylor; Van Hees et al., 2015). Indeed, each autistic student's experience in reconciling their identity is unique.

LGBTQ College Students

Scholars have worked to disaggregate LGBTQ college students' experiences by examining the nuances of how, for instance, trans* (Nicolazzo, 2016a, 2016b), queer (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011), and asexual (Mollet & Lackman, 2018) students navigate higher education with minoritized gender and sexual identities. Students often view themselves as othered (Lange & Moore, 2017), and the salience of their sexual orientation and gender identities may be moderated by other identities and societal roles (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). Some LGBTQ students find engaging in activism to be useful in obtaining support and guidance (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011), but these activities may sometimes lead to experiencing greater victimization and depression (Kulick, Wernick, Woodford, & Renn, 2017). Despite some potentially common experiences of marginalization and handling disclosure across contexts, scholars have pointed out the drawbacks of collapsing multiple identities and communities

under a broad LGBTQ umbrella, including trans* (Nicolazzo, 2016a) and asexual (Mollet & Lackman, 2018) people in particular.

Campus climate can be profoundly impactful in shaping how LGBTQ students see themselves and feel welcomed and safe (Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015). Despite progress at many institutions, LGBTQ students still encounter pervasive homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia on campuses, including harassment, exclusion from the curriculum, and lack of appropriate policies and resources (Rankin, Blumenfeld, Weber, & Frazer, 2010). Even within hostile institutions, however, Vaccaro (2012) found that graduate students in departments with supportive and out faculty, role models, and LGBTQ organizations can help promote positive microclimates.

LGBTQ students also wrestle over identity management, as well as if, and to whom, they should disclose their identities. Reconciling strategic outness (i.e., when and where to disclose) marks many students' experiences (Orne, 2011). More recent literature has attended to the intersection of sexual orientation and/or gender identity with race to reveal the nuances of experiencing multiple minoritized identities in college. Examples of these intersections include queer, Latino men (Eaton & Rios, 2017), gay men of color (Lange & Moore, 2017), and black, non-binary trans* students (Nicolazzo, 2016a). Nicolazzo (2016a) further included disability in her analysis and noted how both disclosure and nondisclosure of trans* identities can be reframed as "positive choices" (p. 1182) that nevertheless may cause alienation or pushback from others. Consequently, LGBTQ students manage their identities in both public spaces and counterspaces, as body language, cultural symbols, and use of silence may work toward exhibiting or concealing sexuality (Lasser & Wicker, 2007).

Intersection of Autistic and LGBTQ Identities

Autistic individuals exhibit greater sex-

ual orientation and gender identity diversity than the general population. One in seven autistic women and one in 20 autistic men are attracted to someone of the same sex (Dewinter, Graaf, & Beeger, 2017). Further, 22% of female and 8% of male participants—assigned these genders at birth—reported some gender non-conforming feelings (Dewinter et al., 2017). Outside of medical/biological approaches (e.g., Dewinter et al., 2015; Jacobs et al., 2014), several participants in Kimball et al.'s (2018) study of students with disabilities had autistic and queer identities. Many challenges exist for autistic LGBTQ students, including higher rates of unwanted sexual contact (Brown, Peña, & Rankin, 2017) and potentially engaging in a coming out process (Davidson & Henderson, 2010).

Theoretical Perspective

The reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity (RMMDI; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) offers a useful theoretical approach in examining the multiple identities of autistic LGBTQ college students and how they make meaning of their identities. Abes et al. (2007) described a core of personal attributes central to each individual. Surrounding the core are various ellipses that represent socially constructed identities such as gender, religion, race, culture, and class. These identities may be closer to or further from a person's core at any time depending on constantly changing context, salience, and importance.

Students' contextual influences, such as family, peers, norms and stereotypes, pass through a meaning-making filter and inform self-perceptions of their multiple identity dimensions. Contextual influences may be filtered to a larger or smaller extent depending on a student's experiences and complexity of developmental processes. Abes et al. (2007) described individuals using a formulaic meaning making filter as only minimally filtering contextual influences; that is, their self-perceptions aligned with how others perceived them. A transi-

tional meaning making filter involved facing tensions within identities, challenging others' expectations, and feeling frustrated by identity labels (Abes et al., 2007). When using a transitional filter, students may find it acceptable to pass for other identities when they experience identity conflicts. The foundational meaning making filter, the most complex, is marked by individuals' capacity to determine relationships between context and perceptions of identity (Abes et al., 2007). Individuals using a foundational filter present themselves and their identities consistently, resist stereotypes, and begin to internally generate their own self-definition of identities.

Jones and Abes (2013) built upon the model to incorporate analysis of intersecting systems of power, such as classism, sexism, and racism, in the intersectional model of multiple dimensions of identity. Though we draw primarily from the 2007 version of the RMMDI, we also acknowledge throughout the paper the roles of ableism, genderism, heterosexism, and intersecting forms of oppression on the lives of autistic LGBTQ students. We also acknowledge that though the RMMDI was developed based on the experience of neurotypical students, the model is used and cited heavily in student affairs. Thus, it is an appropriate entry point for considering how college students understand their multiple identities. We later suggest ways the model might be expanded based on autistic LGBTQ students' experiences.

Methodology

A constructivist lens guided our analysis in this study (Charmaz, 2014). This lens assumes that realities are subjective and socially constructed. Constructivist research "starts with the experience and asks how members construct it," and strives to locate the inquiry "in its web of connections and constraints" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 342). This study applies secondary data analysis to a larger study of the intersections of disability and LGBTQ identities that included 31 un-

dergraduate and graduate students at two universities. While the original study included LGBTQ students with disabilities more broadly, this secondary narrative analysis illuminates the experiences of the eight autistic participants (Table 1).

Data Collection and Participants

The original study employed constructivist grounded theory methods to guide data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). LGBTQ students with disabilities participated in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews about their higher education experiences, social identities, and identity intersections. During interviews, participants were asked questions about their LGBTQ identities, rather than separate questions about gender identity and sexual orientation. All participants discussed their sexual orientation, and the five trans* and non-binary participants discussed their gender identity. Four of the autistic participants attended University 1, a large, predominantly white research university in the South, while the other four were enrolled at University 2, a predominantly white comprehensive university in the South.

Data Analysis

We began analysis by reading each participant's transcribed interview, writing memos about our initial impressions, and meeting to discuss our interpretations. Initially we used constant comparative analysis, coded transcripts, and wrote memos, with the goal of building categories and themes across participants in line with constructivist grounded theory. However, we felt strongly that presenting findings in segmented sections resulted in losing nuances and cohesiveness relative to each participant's experience. Rather than constructing categories based on questions and answers across the eight individual transcripts, we shifted our approach to view each transcript as a participant's narrative description of their identity journeys. As we reviewed transcripts, we noticed that participants provided not

only short, discrete answers to questions, but also told stories with rich examples to illustrate how they understood their identities. Riessman (2003) recognized a similar shift—data being collected for one purpose while narratives still emerged when "participants ... resist[ed] our efforts to fragment their lived experience into thematic (codeable) categories" (p. 331) and instead told stories in response to questions, illustrating "the gap between the standard practice of research interviewing ... and the life world of naturally occurring conversation" (p. 331). We thus framed this secondary analysis as narrative inquiry (Grbich, 2007; Riessman, 2003), in which "first-person accounts of experience constitute the narrative 'text' of this research approach" (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 34).

While all narrative inquiry centers on "stories told by participants" (Grbich, 2007, p. 124), we adopted a socio-cultural narrative approach, assuming that "stories not only reflect culture, ideology, and socialization, but also provide insights into the political and historical climates impacting on the storytellers' lives" (Grbich, 2007, p. 130). Codes and themes are not used to segment data in a socio-cultural narrative approach (Grbich, 2007). Instead, each transcript constituted an individual narrative and we identified significant elements of the stories participants told about their identities, particularly about their autistic and LGBTQ identities. We followed Grbich's (2007) recommended process of identifying narrative segments in transcripts, exploring content and context (e.g., emotions, sense making), and comparing stories across participants. Given our emerging analysis, we determined the RMMDI (Abes et al., 2007) could serve as a framework to help guide our analysis, reflecting our process of "linking emerging findings to any relevant theories" (Grbich, 2007, p. 185). We interpreted participants' narratives through the RMMDI framework and note these elements in the findings and discussion sections. Lastly, we constructed vignettes (Grbich, 2007) with

content most relevant to our research question and outlined highlights of individual participants' narratives.
Table 1. Participants

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Classification</i>	<i>Pronouns</i>	<i>Disabilities^a</i>	<i>LGBTQ identities</i>	<i>Race/ethnicity</i>
Antonio	University 2	Sociology	Undergraduate	he/him	Autism spectrum disorder, neuro-atypical	Androphile, demi-male, non-binary, queer	Latino
Avery	University 1	Psychology	Graduate	she/her	Anxiety, autism spectrum disorder, Asperger's, Lyme disease, neuromuscular condition, OCD	Asexual, panromantic, queer	Mixed race, Chicana, Mexican, White, Native American
Blair	University 1	Computer science	Undergraduate	he/him	Asperger's	Gay	White
Charlotte	University 1	Engineering	Graduate	she/her	Autism spectrum disorder, health problems, injuries, mental health	Queer	White
Hayden	University 2	Religious studies	Undergraduate	he/him, they/them	Asperger's, dyslexia, dysgraphia, bipolar, processing disorder	Asexual, biromantic, transgender male	White
Hugo	University 1	Engineering, linguistics	Undergraduate	he/him	ADHD, anxiety, Asperger's, depression	Demisexual, queer, trans	Person of color, Mexican, Chinese
Kyle	University 2	English	Undergraduate	he/him	Anxiety, autism spectrum disorder	Bisexual, transgender	Irish, does not identify with race
Robin	University 2	International business	Undergraduate	she/her	Anxiety, Asperger's, hypersensitivity, OCD, processing disorders, small motor skills disability	Asexual, demiromantic, gynoromantic, male-to-female transgender	White

^aADHD=attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; OCD=obsessive compulsive disorder

Trustworthiness and Research Team

We sought to build the study's trustworthiness in several ways (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). To bolster credibility, we engaged in member checking and shared interview transcripts with participants for verification and feedback. Additionally, our work pushed us to consider differing insights on the data based on our varied standpoints. Confirmability "requires the researcher to tie findings with data and analysis" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 37). To enhance confirmability, we provided multiple examples and direct quotations. We have provided a full description of our methods to demonstrate dependability, and logged all products from our data analysis and writing process. Lastly, we have aimed to offer a contextual description of students' experiences in this paper that our audiences will find yields transferable insights to their own contexts.

We also reflected on our positionalities in relation to the study and how these affected our data analysis and interpretations. The first researcher, an assistant professor who identifies as white, queer, cisgender, and presently without a disability, began this study after serving as an LGBTQ center director on a college campus. Though he began coming out as gay as a teenager, he has since reflected on ways that spaces such as LGBTQ centers demand public disclosure of identities and how these spaces might center disability and become inclusive of intersecting identities including autism. The second researcher, a doctoral student, identifies as white, gay, cisgender, and has Asperger's. Diagnosed with Asperger's as a child, he uses this terminology, and views himself as part of the autism community. He reflected on the findings and recognized parallels with many of the participants, who similarly only disclosed their autistic and LGBTQ identities upon entering college. The third researcher identifies as an African American, gay, cisgender male associate professor and program director who does not presently have a disability. He approached this research with a keen awareness of intersectionality, with a

particular focus on historically marginalized identities, from his own personal developmental process and through his professional experiences as a mental health counselor. He is sensitive to salience of identity and how it impacts access to public and private spaces and how it influences feelings of safety and connectedness in those spaces. Ultimately, we believe our varied outlooks in relation to autism, sexuality, race/culture, and academic interests/expertise enhanced the study; however, we recognize that our shared identities as cisgender men limited our insights.

Findings

We share vignettes for each of the eight participants in an effort to honor their individual voices and ensure that we highlight the distinctiveness of each narrative as they discuss their college experiences and how they managed their identities. As the vignettes below demonstrate, autistic LGBTQ college students in this study faced a number of circumstances when they reconciled their overlapping identities, and determined whether and how to share, express, and build community based on their identities. Following the vignettes, we note the prominent roles of passing, social engagement, and self-acceptance in students' narratives.

Antonio

Antonio contended that having Asperger's led him to incomplete gender socialization:

Because I have Asperger's Syndrome and I don't pick up social norms as quickly as other children do, I didn't pick up that when you reach a certain age you are supposed to declare a sexual faction, so to speak. ... I identify ... in an undisclosed area between being gender neutral and being a male.

He described the Wrong Planet website as a platform for self-discovery, since it represented the first place where he both came out and realized that many autistic individuals also identify as LGBTQ. Antonio

explained how the LGBTQ community has embraced some of his characteristics, like being curious and odd. He also noted that the LGBTQ community must make strides in recognizing the intersectionality of identities and not act as prejudiced toward other marginalized groups.

Antonio participated in a university program supporting autistic students. However, he found pervasive heteronormativity. He shared that some of his fellow autistic peers became uncomfortable when he described his boyfriend.

Avery

Avery found her identities to be interconnected — “they can’t be pulled away from each other,” she said — and also pointed to anecdotal evidence of individuals who are both autistic and asexual. She described her years-long process of understanding her sexuality, eventually resulting in identifying as asexual in college. She told herself, “Oh, I guess I consider myself asexual. I guess I’m not broken. I thought I was broken.” Similarly, Avery discussed the relief of receiving an autism diagnosis in college that she should have received as a child. Avery said that,

in the early ‘90s, they didn’t diagnose girls very often. They certainly didn’t diagnose girls who were incredibly intelligent. It was just, ‘Wow, what a weird kid.’ ... They had to push my head down so I would walk flatfooted.

She found the disability community to be open to LGBTQ identities based on similar marginalization. Like Antonio, Avery said she found participating in the LGBTQ community to be difficult, but mostly because of the “expectation to be outgoing and to be exuberant.” This undermined her difficulties associated with social situations. “It’s certainly not trying to be exclusive of people with any sort of disability like that, but I think it unintentionally is and scares people like myself away from those spaces,” she said.

Blair

Similar to other participants, Blair’s introverted disposition prompted clashes between being both gay and having Asperger’s. He noted that having Asperger’s was one of his most important identities, though he “mostly [identifies] with the general community, not the disabled.” He was one of three participants to explicitly note passing related to autism: “I understand what it’s like to have Asperger’s, but talking with another person who has Asperger’s can be really, really unpleasant.” To counteract this, Blair described learning to have more balanced conversations with other individuals, as opposed to “talk[ing] at people.”

At times, Blair also tried to “function normally in society” through observing other individuals, though it has made him “feel like I’m less Asperger’s.” Negative connotations of autism are pervasive, Blair said, ranging from others viewing him as “retarded” or “treat[ing] me like it’s a super power.” He elaborated: “I feel like there is a lot of pressure in society to be social. That can erase the identity of people who have autism or Asperger’s or other disabilities that make it difficult to socialize.”

Charlotte

While Charlotte was never diagnosed with autism, she identifies as autistic due to her characteristics and challenges. She described finding it more difficult to reconcile her disability identity at the university, more so than her queer identity, due to her disability impacting engagement with peers in group assignments. Charlotte, who recognized that she often passes for heterosexual and able-bodied, elected to share her disability only if peers asked why she takes exams in different locations, or when she participates on disability panels.

Unlike other participants, Charlotte felt her overlapping identities were not as interconnected. “They are related in how they affect my interactions with the world, but not how they affect me,” she said. While she actively engaged on disability forums in

the past, she strayed away when individuals complained about problems they encountered.

Hayden

Hayden shared that growing up he "always knew [he] identified more with the guys" and "wanted to do guy things," despite his parents trying to socializing him as a girl. While in high school, Hayden initially felt he was bisexual. Later he researched the trans* community, initially thinking being trans* was just a phase, but he later fell into depression. Hayden's mom has not accepted his gender identity, still calling him by a girl's name, and questioning his sexuality. "I've noticed lately she excessively calls me her daughter," Hayden said.

Similar difficulties emerged when coming out to his trans* friend, who already knew Hayden had Asperger's. "They kinda like questioned my ability to know who I am and they were like, 'you know we all sorta feel a little bit more masculine sometimes than others,' and I'm like, 'no.'" Though Hayden did not speak to the intersection of his gender identity and autism beyond this particular anecdote, he noted reconciling living with other disabilities, including dyslexia, dysgraphia, a processing disorder, and bipolar disorder. He also participated in his university's autistic organization.

Hugo

Hugo was diagnosed as autistic as a child and began researching the spectrum in college, finding the process to be therapeutic:

It was a very liberating moment for me to finally say, "I'm not just a bad person. I'm not just lazy. I'm not just a terrible, horrible person who doesn't want to do anything or be with people. This is something that is not wrong. It's just who I am."

At many points, Hugo described connections between autism and demisexuality, including his hesitance to develop close relationships. Beginning his gender transition in

high school made him feel that "the weight of the world fell" on him, as he realized that he "was going to be discriminated [against] my whole life for my identities."

Hugo, akin to other participants, expressed tension in having multiple minoritized identities, and only disclosed his queer/demisexual identities with individuals he knew.

I feel like I am always at a disadvantage in every place that I go to. Sometimes, I wonder if I am making all of this up in saying, "I just want to be oppressed." For some reason, I want to be the person who's always miserable because it just so happens that I have all of these identities that are marginalized. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm doing this to myself. That feels really, really bad, because when I do find community that does accept me for everything, then it's a really great feeling.

Kyle

Kyle shared that he enjoyed the "in-betweenism of being both trans and bisexual. I think it gives me a level of insight into masculine and feminine ... as well as aesthetics that other people don't have." When asked about the relationship among his identities, Kyle did not explicitly discuss connections related to his autism and trans*/bisexual identities. However, he referenced one situation when he concluded others wanted to dictate his identities to him. Kyle described being autistic as influencing feelings of sensory overload and anxiety; consequently, he compensated by wearing special glasses to reduce brightness. In describing his disability's salience, Kyle said that a classmate questioned why he was wearing glasses and drew a link with others placing assumptions on his gender identity:

As many people as there are on this campus who are very entitled and feel like they're in a place where they can tell me more about my gender and my identity. And I believe that they have the right to have an opinion, but not to

say that my opinion is invalid because it could be bad for the community.

In this quote, Kyle expressed his frustration with how others invalidated aspects of his identities, drawing a parallel in this experience with both autism and gender identity.

Robin

Robin described how interconnections between being autistic and trans*, as well as how other disabilities, influence how she interacts with others and presents herself. Though she used her work in retail as an outlet to practice social interactions, she noted that coping with hypersensitivity, anxiety, and OCD amounted to constant stress. She said, "My ability to socialize has mitigated a lot of disability issues so it's made discrimination less prominent, and I could see where it would be if I had not adapted as well as I have now." Still, she acknowledged that she could "see it happening around me to those who have not progressed as much" in adapting their social behaviors.

The LGBTQ community was a helpful outlet to connect with other individuals, "because a lot of us are [affected] by the same set of disability, so we understand what we're going through," she said. Robin described altering her presentation of her trans* identity based on the specific space. She presented more visibly in spaces where trans* identities are valued and viewed as important. Robin noted, "it has been [an] interesting experience reaching the point of having passing privilege because many times at this point in my transition, I do not get identified as trans* right away unless my voice gives me a problem that day or something."

Patterns Across Narratives

First, we recognized how several students reflected on their ability to pass and reasons for passing, whether as neurotypical, heterosexual, and/or cisgender, sometimes even altering their own traits or visual cues associated with their identities. For instance, Blair noted how he tried to sup-

press the visibility of having Asperger's because of negative connotations often associated with autism. Participants noted they sometimes concealed their sexuality and/or gender identity to conform with society. As Avery said, she experienced "conflicts about how much to disclose" based on dual roles as both autistic and a researcher who studies autism. Similarly, Hayden had not shared his identities to his professors out of fear of being harshly graded.

Second, students' social anxiety, as well as ableism in LGBTQ communities and heterosexism/genderism in autism or disability communities, often dictated their degree of engagement in social situations. For instance, Antonio noted the prevalence of ableism yet downplayed it because he did not always view it as intentional: "I guess a lot of times it's in very kind of muted ways because I don't think people overtly try to... express themselves in an ableist way." Conversely, Antonio found that members of an autism group he belonged to showed discomfort when he mentioned his sexuality. Although both autistic and LGBTQ populations are minoritized, exclusionary behaviors are still prevalent at times across each community, further illustrating the complexities of being accepted for multiple identities.

Third, we observed the range of self-acceptance and pride individuals noted in describing their identities. Students shared the challenges of determining when one identity's traits or challenges became more salient than another identity, or even when they intermingled. Whereas Hugo felt continually marginalized, an experience heightened even more by his racial identity, Antonio reflected on and accepted not growing up with common understandings of norms related to sexuality and gender. Students' strengths of connections with their own identities, others who accepted their identities, and even peers who possessed similar identities all played into how they interpreted their intersecting identities.

Discussion

Through narrative inquiry, we examined how autistic LGBTQ college students made meaning of their identities through sharing their life stories and experiences. Unlike prior studies that consider links between sexuality and autism (Dewinter et al., 2015) and gender identity and autism (Jacobs et al., 2014), we eschewed a medical or diagnostic approach and instead highlighted how autistic LGBTQ students understood their multiple identities. Utilizing the RMMDI allowed us to consider participants' multiple identity dimensions, contextual influences, and the relative complexity with which those contextual influences were filtered to make sense of their identities. Though all participants absorbed, to some degree, the influences of peers, families of origin, and stereotypes, we note that no participant in the study consistently made meaning of their experiences in a formulaic manner (Abes et al., 2007). Participants often used a transitional meaning-making filter, as they began to resist ableism, genderism, heterosexism, and intersecting forms of oppression — resistance noted in prior work (e.g., Nicolazzo, 2016b) — and did not unquestioningly accept contextual influences.

Participants still navigated conflicts within their identities and occasionally relied on a formulaic acceptance of messages from others about their identities. Most participants were involved in an LGBTQ community, such as a student organization, but they often found social situations in such spaces difficult to navigate, as reflected in prior research about autistic students (Cox et al., 2017; Vincent et al., 2017), and generally avoided building connections or community based on autism. Accordingly, these participants often described various aspects of their identities as distinct or segmented rather than intersecting. While Hugo was one exception to that pattern, demonstrating immense self-awareness about his identities and their intersections, he still occasionally found himself questioning his experiences and whether the marginalization

he faced was somehow his own fault.

Participants who exhibited foundational meaning-making of their identities (Abes et al., 2007) engaged with both autistic and LGBTQ communities, including in online spaces where identity complexity could be embraced. Antonio voiced a strong awareness of the marginalization he experienced as a "second-class citizen" due to his identities as autistic, non-binary, queer, and Latino. He joined the university's program for autistic students, but found it heteronormative and turned to online spaces to explore gender and sexuality norms in relation to autism. Likewise, Avery embraced the intersectionality of her multiple privileged and oppressed identities, revealing that she became involved in online communities as a source of learning, connection, and validation to overcome isolation and social struggles as an undergraduate. When participants used transitional and foundational meaning-making filters, they expressed awareness of social difficulties associated with autism and worked, to some degree, to alter how they related to others socially, strategies seen in other research about autistic students (Cox et al., 2017). Use of a foundational filter went a step beyond this awareness to students questioning whether and why they should alter their traits rather than finding or building communities that might embrace their full identities. Therefore, we distinguished transitional from foundational meaning-making based on this awareness, questioning of norms, and resistance, rather than on a distinction between passing or consistently expressing identities.

Our study suggests areas in which the RMMDI can be expanded based on the perspectives of autistic LGBTQ students. The model was initially developed with neurotypical students and thus did not include the perspectives of autistic students. Given how autistic students work to form relationships and learn how to express themselves socially, this is a missing piece that helps to explain some of the study's findings. Most

importantly, the model places a premium on whether students “presented their identity in a consistent manner regardless of the environment” (Abes et al., 2007, p. 11) and thus links internal complexity of an individual’s meaning making ability with external disclosure and expression of multiple identities—a position we reject based on how participants described their identity management decisions.

We did not find that any participants described complete consistency in their understandings of their identities and how they expressed them. However, students demonstrated evidence of complex meaning-making and a careful evaluation, rather than automatic acceptance, of contextual influences in their lives. Students evaluated situations based on prior experiences, available resources, and consequences that might accompany their decisions to highlight or downplay their identities, a theme found in prior research on both autistic (e.g., Knott & Taylor, 2014; Van Hees et al., 2015) and LGBTQ student populations (e.g., Lange & Moore, 2017; Miller, Wynn, & Webb, 2019; Miller, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2016a, 2016b; Orne, 2011). Scholars have reframed (non) disclosure and passing as viable options to keep oneself safe and to maintain relationships (Miller et al., 2019; Nicolazzo, 2016a). Our participants embodied aspects of Orne’s (2011) strategic outness, in that students carefully evaluated their environments and others’ attitudes before sharing their identities. Based on this study’s findings, we argue that internal meaning-making and external expression of identities may not neatly align and thus should not automatically be linked. We question whether identities “peacefully co-exist[ing]” (Abes et al., 2007, p. 11) is desirable or possible, as college campuses can be hostile for autistic LGBTQ students. Each new context warrants consideration of how to manage or express identities and students’ identities will likely continue to evolve.

This study is limited by several factors. First, we examined the experiences of au-

tistic LGBTQ students at two southern, predominantly white four-year universities. Because most autistic students attend two-year colleges (Snyder et al., 2016), this context warrants additional exploration in future work. Second, since our study focused on the student as the unit of analysis, due to our emphasis on uncovering how they made meaning of their identities and experiences, we did not focus primarily on the institutional context. We acknowledge, however, that future work should more explicitly explore the role of institutional climate and regional and geographic areas in shaping these students’ experiences. Third, drawing from a one-time interview also restricts the conclusions we can draw about how students made meaning of their identities. A longitudinal approach might better capture how students develop and name their identities over time, offering additional insights for researchers and practitioners.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings, we saw several areas of opportunities for student affairs practitioners, faculty members, and college administrators to enhance the climate for autistic LGBTQ students. Colleges must create campus spaces that embrace students’ unique and intersectional identities. Student organizations and campus offices (e.g., LGBT center, disability services office) are not always welcoming venues for students to disclose other marginalized identities. Practitioners possessing expertise in identity-based work, and who utilize an asset-based lens, should lead workshops and trainings that address topics beyond the surface level. They must also aim to recognize and accept students’ intersectional identities, and utilize inclusive teaching practices that honor students’ various learning and communication preferences. Furthermore, colleges must create or promote intersectional communities, including online venues, to encourage inclusivity and community across identity lines.

Practitioners across all campus units,

offices, and spaces must support students in navigating identity management. First, practitioners must more frequently and intentionally collaborate with one another to ensure students are welcomed into settings that explicitly recognize singular and intersecting identities. Accordingly, students may not feel passing is automatically negative or necessary. Campuses taking these measures may prompt students to no longer feel they must erase an aspect of their identity based on how others treat them.

Second, practitioners must make an effort to partake in or find programming (in person or virtually) that center on topics like intersectionality, universal design, and employing more inclusive communication strategies with students. Such insights may influence reformation of existing content in orientations, learning communities, and other campus events, or inspire developing new programming. Practitioners may also explore how online platforms that address intersectionality, akin to the spaces that Avery noted, may foster greater community for autistic LGBTQ students.

Third, practitioners must increase access in referring students who have autistic traits to obtain a diagnosis, a recommendation complicated by students' access to and potentially negative past experiences with medical/healthcare systems. In this endeavor, practitioners must also work to detect and work to eradicate the barriers, financial and otherwise, to healthcare and resources that may help students make sense of these identities.

Implications for Research

We also offer several implications for future research topics and methods. We recommend that researchers work to design flexible processes that share power with research participants to the greatest extent possible. While this can include community-based and participatory action research designs, flexibility in interview-based studies allows participants to choose the interview time, location, question sequence, and

format (e.g., one interview or two shorter interviews, reviewing questions ahead of time). These techniques work to accommodate sensory, communication, and other needs, and maximize comfort and rapport building.

As this research area is emergent, we call for additional scholarship that explores these identities in tandem and also integrates the nuances of additional social identities including race, class, and religion, as well as other contexts including the two-year college environment. Scholarship should also further explore how educators can develop safe spaces for students to explore their multiple identities. We also urge scholars and practitioners to avoid viewing autistic and LGBTQ students in a binary manner. Both identities may be fluid for students and their understanding of either identity may evolve over time. Researchers should be mindful to craft research questions and designs in a way that acknowledges fluidity, as well as avoids depicting identities as static or "just a phase" in students' lives. We call for research that adopts an asset-based lens, recognizing the strengths that autistic and LGBTQ students possess and not simply the challenges they encounter.

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