

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Exploring the Lived Experiences of Autistic Undergraduate Psychology Students Engaging and Integrating within UCalgary

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Abstract: Research studying autism has often had a negative, deficit-based outlook on the diagnosis. Additionally, many studies highlight barriers or challenges encountered by the autistic population (McLeod et al., 2021; Shembri-Mutch et al., 2024). Another factor leading to knowledge-gaps in the vast collection of autism research is a disproportionate lack of autistic representation throughout all stages of the research process (Leadbitter et al., 2021). Currently, there is a gap in accessible post-secondary educational research regarding how neurodiverse individuals experience and engage with university life and integrate within the larger campus community. Neurodiversity (or neurodivergence) is a term that describes a range of neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism, and is an understanding that brain differences among people are a natural and valuable part of human diversity (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024).

Therefore, the goal of my research is to identify autistic students' strengths, challenges, and adaptations (academic *and* social) to undergraduate psychology program expectations via analyzing their lived experiences from a strengths-based perspective. My research is informed by my experiences as a male, queer, neurodiverse student and researcher. I adopt a transformative-pragmatic researcher paradigm elaborated on by Romm (2014) for generating transformative social change in an educational context via research producing practical recommendations or solutions in mind. Furthermore, my work is theoretically informed via Intersectional Based Analysis which can be used to consider the complexities of intersectional lived experiences with regards to specific institutional actions and policy impacts on diverse social groups (Hankivsky, 2021). Intersectionality refers to the multiple intersecting identities one holds and the how they relate to experienced, often compounding, systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991).

Participants ($n = 3$) were recruited from The University of Calgary via intermediary contact, snowball sampling, and word-of-mouth. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data due to their flexible nature which allows for clarification and elaboration from the participants. Analysis has yet to be conducted but will be done using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2022). IPA allows for a rich exploration of how participants make sense of important life experiences, such as attending university. Preliminary findings (without an in depth look at intersectionality) suggest there is variation in ease-of-accessing and knowledge of supports on campus, that education around autism in a psychology degree was personally helpful but peer-to-peer knowledge/support was lacking, and that being autistic helped academically (being passionate, curious, interested) but also led to experiencing social challenges (hiding autistic traits, using energy to do so, and experiencing social stigma). Findings will have implications for how to better support autistic psychology students at the undergraduate level from an intersectional, strengths-based perspective.

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