*Corresponding Author's Email: bi23qp@student.sunderland.ac.uk
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The Experiences of Internalized Ableism of Seven Transgender Autistic Adults

Jude Merit
University of Sunderland, United Kingdom

Abstract

This study, completed in 2023, explored the intersectional experiences of internalized ableism among transgender autistic adults, addressing a significant gap in understanding how these multiple marginalized identities shape lived experiences. Utilizing Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, the research drew insights from seven participants across the United States and the United Kingdom. To ensure inclusivity, interviews were conducted via diverse modes—live text, video chat, and asynchronous Qualtrics formats—allowing participants to choose the most accessible approach. The study revealed key themes, including struggles with identity, masking, misconceptions about autism, authenticity, community connection, and advocacy. Participants expressed feelings of alienation and the pressure to mask their authentic selves to fit societal expectations, which took a toll on their mental health. Experiences of being misunderstood and stereotyped further compounded feelings of isolation. However, participants also highlighted the empowerment gained through embracing authenticity, finding supportive communities, and advocating for neurodiversity. The findings underscore the complexity of autistic experiences, particularly when intersected with other dimensions such as gender, disability, and socioeconomic status. This research not only illustrates the challenges faced by transgender autistic individuals but also celebrates their resilience and the importance of supportive environments. The study calls for increased awareness and inclusive practices to better support individuals navigating multiple marginalized identities. Findings contribute to ongoing research efforts aimed at fostering a society that values neurodiversity and authentic self-expression.

Keywords: Identity Struggles, Intersectionality, Marginalization, Neurodiversity, Self-advocacy

1. Introduction

This study examined internalized ableism in autistic transgender participants, emphasizing intersectionality through open-ended questions that captured participants' voices and experiences in a full and authentic manner. Existing research highlights the significant overlap between autistic and transgender populations, with autistic individuals being more likely to

identify as transgender than their neurotypical peers and vice versa (Cascio et al., 2021; Warrier et al., 2020). However, studies specifically addressing the intersectionality of these identities remain scarce, necessitating further exploration (Cooper et al., 2023).

Intersectionality, as defined by Crenshaw (1989), is a framework that recognizes how overlapping social identities contribute to systemic oppression. This concept is critical in understanding the experiences of transgender autistic individuals, as examining individual demographics separately fails to capture the full scope of their lived realities (Duran et al., 2020; Kapilashrami & Hankivsky, 2018). Prior research in feminist and disability studies underscores the importance of an intersectional lens in capturing the complexities of marginalized identities (Miller, 2018). In this study, participants shared their experiences holistically, narrating their identities in their own words to reflect the nuanced interplay between autism and gender identity.

1.1 Literature Review

Although previous studies on intersectionality and marginalized identities provide valuable insights, there remain gaps in understanding how these factors intersect specifically for transgender autistic individuals. Existing research has largely focused on either autism or transgender identity in isolation, without fully examining how these identities coalesce to shape experiences of discrimination, self-perception, and resilience (James et al., 2020; Toft & Franklin, 2020). Further, while studies have explored internalized ableism within autistic populations, there is limited literature addressing its compounded impact when combined with gender dysphoria and societal transphobia (Featherstone et al., 2022). By integrating perspectives from disability justice and queer theory, this study expands on existing frameworks and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of these intersectional experiences.

2. Methods

2.1 Participant Demographics

Participants consisted of the seven out of ten autistic adult participants in this masters dissertation project who identified as both autistic and transgender. Participants were not required to have a formal diagnosis of either being autistic or transgender, as self-identification was welcome in this study. Formal medical diagnosis can be inaccessible for many reasons, including monetary reasons, geographical location, time limitations, living situation, and any other number of reasons, and as such, self-identification is considered completely valid (Featherstone et al., 2022; Lewis, 2017).

Five of the participants were assigned female at birth, meaning that when they were born, the doctor filed their sex as female based on their physical appearance at birth (American Psychological Association, 2023). Two participants were assigned male at birth. Four of the participants identified as non-binary at the time of the interviews. The participants ranged from twenty-four to forty-three in age, and spanned a wide range of racial, disabled/abled, national origin, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

2.2 Data Collection Methodology

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted one-on-one between the researcher and the participants. Questions were focused on the life experiences of the participants with a lens of their experiences with internalized ableism. Participants were offer three possible methods to engage in the interview process.

The first option was a live video chat, where the participant would converse with the researcher via live video chat, with both the researcher and participant using spoken language to converse in real-time. The second option was a live chat option, which consisted of the participant and researcher both joining a private chat room, where the researcher typed questions and the participant typed their answers, both in real-time. The third option was for the participant to fill out their answers to the interview questions via a Qualtrics form. The participant accessed the form via a web link sent to them via email, and could exit the form and return to it for up to two weeks, at which time it would expire and their responses would be erased if they did not submit it prior to that time.

2.3 Ethics

2.3.1 Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Information regarding the participant requirements and disqualifiers was supplied to the participants, and consent included confirmation that they met the demographic requirements for the research project. Participants were supplied with an information sheet with information about the study and what to expect, as well as a list of interview questions which was provided ahead of time to mitigate any anxiety that can occur for autistic people due to not knowing what to expect. I explained that the list of questions provided would be the baseline for the interview, but that they could add things they thought were important but not covered, and that I might ask follow up questions with their consent. If the participants did not want me to ask follow-up questions, I respected their wishes and did not do so.

2.3.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Participants were informed in writing of their right to anonymity and confidentiality. Each participant chose an anonymous identifier made of their favorite number and color, for example 4PINK. For the video chat and live chat options, participants could end the interview at any time by telling the researcher they would like to stop. They also had the option to withdraw, and could either state that they wished to withdraw their information, or, whether the interview was completed or not, the researcher confirmed their permission for their data to be used at the end of the interview. If they wished to skip any question, they were informed that they could skip a question by saying, “Pass” or otherwise expressing that they didn’t wish to answer the question. They were also able to come back to the question later, in case they’d like to move on for now, or they would like more time to think about it. For live chat and video chat participants, they were informed in the interview as well as in writing that they were able to withdraw their consent to be included in the study up to three days after the interview, when anonymization would occur, and consent could no longer be withdrawn.

For the Qualtrics asynchronous option, participants were informed that their responses were not registered or visible to the researcher until they submitted the form. Should they choose to withdraw prior to submitting their answers, those answers would be deleted and the researcher would not see them. They were able to come back to the form and continue to answer later, including editing their existing responses, but saving their responses for later editing would not make them visible to the researcher. At the time at which they submitted their answers, they are considered anonymized, and consent could no longer be revoked.

After responses were received, live options were transcribed, and Qualtrics answers were downloaded, and the responses were anonymized to make sure that no identifying information was kept in the data for processing.

2.3.3 Thematic Analysis and Reflexivity

Though the overarching focus of the research conducted was to identify the participants' experiences with internalized ableism, many subthemes were identified, including masking (both autistic masking as well as masking in relation to other marginalized identities), otherness, interpersonal victimization, marginalization, employment, intersectionality, and joy.

These themes were explored using thematic analysis and interpretive phenomenological analysis, with an active focus on reflexivity to ensure that the voices of the participants were the forefront of the findings, with as little bias as possible from the researcher, who is autistic and transgender and therefore an embedded researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Trymata, 2023). Reflexivity measures included peer debriefing, critical self-reflection, and extensive note taking and organization of data findings as well as frequent feedback from supervisors.

It is also important to note that this study could benefit from a larger sample size to enhance generalizability, and that the research is largely theoretical, indicating a need for further research into practical applications.

2.3.4 Safeguarding

As being autistic and transgender in the current world tends to be inherently traumatic, the nature of the interviews conducted, as expected, contained a considerable amount of traumatic content (Pearson et al., 2023; Trundle et al., 2023). Because of this, and to ensure the safety of the participants, participants were given information on organizations and contact information that may be helpful with ongoing mental health issues or in a crisis. The researcher is also a trained crisis counselor, but acknowledges that it is not his role in the study as researcher to be a mental health aid, and therefore, while his training ensured safety during the interviews, signposting was employed for post-interview needs.

3. Results

3.1 Intersectionality

Intersectionality is essential for understanding the lived experiences of transgender autistic individuals (Cascio et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2023; Duran et al., 2020; Miller, 2018; Toft & Franklin, 2020). Unlike single-axis approaches that examine gender identity or neurodivergence separately, an intersectional lens reveals how multiple marginalized identities interact in complex ways, often leading to compounded discrimination and exclusion (Miller, 2018; Toft & Franklin, 2020).

Participants described how their identities were frequently misunderstood or erased. Many reported that their gender identity was dismissed due to their autism, with others assuming they were merely "confused." This erasure led to struggles with self-acceptance and a heightened sense of alienation.

"The people around me couldn't separate my gender from my autism. They assumed my gender was just a 'special interest' or a phase." – 4PINK

Race further complicated these experiences, with some participants describing the intersection of racial, gender, and neurodivergent discrimination.

"What I go through as a person with autism, a Black female that is a they them nonbinary, for a lot of people, they choose to hate it." – 3BLACK

For several, discovering their autistic identity was deeply tied to their gender identity, illustrating how self-discovery is often interconnected.

"I started coming out as queer around the same time that I started coming out as autistic… that journey was very linked for me." – 2BLUE

Systemic barriers also limited access to diagnoses and support, further marginalizing participants.

"I'll probably never get a proper autism diagnosis. My sexuality makes allistic people believe I'm faking it for attention, as most don't think my sexualities are valid either." – 8GREEN

These findings highlight the necessity of inclusive policies that recognize the complex, intersecting challenges faced by autistic transgender individuals.

3.2 Masking

Masking—the process of altering behavior to conform to societal expectations—was a prominent theme among all participants. Many described the exhaustion of constantly suppressing both autistic traits and gender identity to fit into neurotypical and cisnormative spaces.

"For many years, I carried a lot of shame. I was embarrassed and spent so much time masking that I eventually lost my sense of self." – 9GOLD

This "double masking" often led to burnout and emotional distress (Barker, 2021; Miller et al., 2021).

"I have to put on a mask to pretend to be normal. Afterwards, I tend to crash emotionally and feel like I've been in a car accident." – 8GREEN

Even within autistic communities, participants noted that masking expectations persisted.

"Even people that were autistic or knew about autism would still get mad at me if I wasn't masking well enough." – 2BLUE

However, many found relief in spaces where masking was not required.

"It can be really fun and interesting to just be able to be autistic without anybody having to try to mask for the comfort of neurotypicals." – 2BLUE

These findings emphasize the need for autism-friendly, gender-affirming environments that allow individuals to express their identities without fear of judgment.

3.3 Otherness

A persistent sense of "otherness" shaped many participants' experiences, influencing their relationships, education, and employment.

"I've also struggled a lot with finding somebody who understood and appreciated the way my head works." – 2CAN

This feeling of alienation often began in childhood.

"I never felt like I had a place. It seemed like everyone else knew what was going on and how to interact with each other." – 9GOLD

Some described how communication challenges reinforced this isolation.

"I had difficulty making friends and would go mute in social situations. It made me fear people and public situations." – 8GREEN

Internalized self-doubt also stemmed from societal pressures to conform.

"Systems were built for other people's needs, not for mine. I should try harder to be like other people, instead of being different and having problems that other people don't have." – 2CAN

For many, finding neurodivergent and transgender communities helped reframe their experiences, providing validation and support.

3.4 Interpersonal Victimization

Many participants experienced bullying, discrimination, and abuse, reinforcing their struggles with self-worth (Pearson, 2023).

"I have difficulty connecting with my boyfriend, as he often uses the R-word to describe autism and will make fun of any calming stims I do in front of him." – 8GREEN

Parental rejection was also a common theme.

"I recall being maybe like ten years old in a grocery store doing the little like dinosaur arm thing… And my mom slapped me and said I looked like a retard and that I should stop that." – 2BLUE

These experiences highlight the urgent need for education and advocacy to challenge ableist and transphobic attitudes.

3.5 Marginalization

Marginalization shaped nearly every aspect of participants' lives, including education, employment, healthcare, and housing (Ableism in Academia, 2020; Jordan, 2021; Vedeler, 2024).

"As an adult, I still fumble when asking for help. I feel like people aren't going to think my struggles are valid." – 2CAN

Many faced barriers to diagnosis and support due to financial limitations.

"The result was me never being assessed and never getting assistance. My current employer, though progressive, has nothing in place to accommodate me." – 9GOLD

Employment discrimination was another significant challenge.

"Part of why I couldn't fucking get a job is that I wasn't good enough at masking. So I got better at it and I got jobs." – 2BLUE

These findings underscore the need for systemic reforms to improve accessibility and workplace accommodations.

3.6 Community

Finding supportive communities was a transformative experience, offering validation and relief from masking and marginalization (Bagatell, 2010; Botha, 2021).

"I feel much safer talking to and interacting with other autistic people." – 9GOLD

Online platforms, particularly Reddit, were cited as crucial resources.

"I found community through Reddit. Finding other people like me was a big deal." – 2BLUE

The support received in these spaces fostered self-acceptance and resilience.

"They [creatives/autistics] will look at you, be like I love the fact that you were able to be yourself around us and I hope that you continue doing that." – 3BLACK

3.7 Joy

Despite the challenges, participants found profound joy in self-acceptance, personal passions, and community.

"I have a lot of passion when I decide I love something. I'm all in or nothing at all." – 8GREEN

Routine also provided stability and comfort.

"Having a routine… for me, I find comfort in routine because I don't have to feel anxious." – 3BLACK

Self-expression was another major source of happiness.

"My favorite part is having special interests that I'm fixated on. I believe immersing myself in them will help me to make some positive impact on the world around me." – 9GOLD

These experiences highlight the importance of fostering spaces where autistic transgender individuals can thrive, not just survive.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

4.1 Practical Implications

While the study primarily contributes to theoretical discussions on intersectionality, it also highlights important practical considerations. One of the most significant findings relates to the impact of accessible and affirming environments. Participants described the critical role of online and in-person communities in fostering self-acceptance and reducing the need for masking (Botha, 2021). These findings suggest that support groups and workplace accommodations tailored for neurodivergent and transgender individuals could significantly enhance well-being and inclusion. Employers, educators, and healthcare providers must adopt more intersectional approaches to policy and practice to better support these communities.

Additionally, the study underscores the necessity of re-evaluating diagnostic criteria and healthcare accessibility. As several participants noted barriers to obtaining formal autism diagnoses due to biases against transgender individuals, there is a need for more inclusive and affirming medical practices (Lewis, 2017). Policies that recognize self-identification and reduce bureaucratic obstacles could improve access to necessary accommodations and support systems.

4.2 Conclusion

This study explored the intersectional experiences of internalized ableism among transgender autistic adults, highlighting the compounded challenges they face concerning masking, otherness, interpersonal victimization, marginalization, and the pursuit of community and joy. Through qualitative analysis, the research provided insight into participants' lived realities, demonstrating the importance of an intersectional approach in understanding their experiences.

Although limited by a small sample size and geographic constraints, this study contributes valuable insights to an underexplored area of research. Future research should aim to expand participant diversity and include longitudinal studies to track how experiences evolve over time. Additionally, increased attention to practical applications, such as policy changes and inclusive interventions, will further strengthen the impact of these findings.

By continuing to build upon this research, scholars, advocates, and policymakers can work toward a future where transgender autistic individuals are not only understood and accepted but fully supported in living authentic and fulfilling lives.

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